PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO | PS PLUS

PLAY

NO.1 FOR PS5

ISSUE 39
MAY 2024
gamesradar.com/playmag

XBOX HITS PS5!

HI-FI RUSH and more former exclusives come to PlayStation – could Halo be on the way?

→HUGE EXPANSION

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

The studio's most ambitious DLC yet looks stunning

→PS5 EXCLUSIVE

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH REVIEWED!

Bigger, better, Buster Swordier: our verdict on 2024's must-play

→FIRST VERDICT!

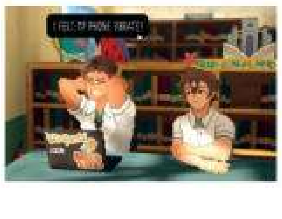
RISE OF THE RONIN

Ninja Gaiden dev's first open world impresses on PS5!

→RIP-ROARING ROBOS

STELLAR BLADE SHARPENS ITS STEEL

Nier meets Sekiro in this massive android adventure



→WE'VE PLAYED IT!

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Welcome

This might be a world first – an Xbox game on a PlayStation mag cover! That's right, you're holding history in your hands thanks to the bold new strategy from Xbox to release former console exclusives multiplatform. And good ones too. We can't complain about having more to play on our PS5s!

Which means another historic first: a feature digging into Xbox's strategy for the future (p48). Bringing across Grounded, Sea Of Thieves, Pentiment, and Hi-Fi Rush is a big deal, but Microsoft isn't the only firm grappling with a changing industry. We reap the crop of new games to play now, but there are big questions about the next few years. Though putting a score on Pentiment (p54) and Hi-Fi Rush (p56) certainly feels novel!

Bandai Namco has an answer of its own with Unknown 9 (p6), whose world you can get lost in ahead of the game's release thanks to its nature as a transmedia project. The first in a series of novels is already out, as is a podcast. Meanwhile, FromSoftware (p10) is renowned for releasing hefty DLCs to bridge the gap between its monumental releases, though Elden Ring's is so big it feels like it would be a full-price release from any other studio.

Or is the future more likely to be dominated by regularly-updated games? Could it be a deluge of gacha games like the nevertheless irresistible Zenless Zone Zero (p40)? Or something with a hidden game master and a story crafted around player action like in the indomitable Helldivers 2 (p80)?

In the present, at least, there's no end to the great games we can enjoy. Final Fantasy VII Rebirth (p68) might throw back to a classic, but moves the RPG genre forward. New Star GP (p92) proves you don't need licensed flash to make one of the best racers in years. Balatro (p79) shows that in a canny dev's hands even a pack of cards can become something fresh and exciting. As is this mag, we hope. Enjoy reading, and stick around for more on what's to come as 2024 rolls on!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR
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GAME OF THE MONTH
Final Fantasy VII Rebirth
BEST BOX
Unpacking

STAY UPDATED
SIGN UP TO OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

THIS MONTH'S PS(X)-FORCE

Ben Wilson
CONTRIBUTOR
Torn from another The Wire binge and thrown into the ring, Ben's grappled with another annual entry.

GAME OF THE MONTH
WWE 2K24
BEST BOX
The Wire (yes, the DVDs will work in the PS5)

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
From fending off pirates to gigantic ants, exploring Xbox's bountiful treasure of live service games has been an adventure.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Balatro
BEST BOX
Jackbox Party Pack

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
A fan of sci-fi fantasy and with a history of SFX book reviews, Unknown 9 is Mim's own personal siren song. Time to give in?

GAME OF THE MONTH
A Little To The Left
BEST BOX
Mimic, Dragon Quest

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Like John Wick, Milf dug up his box of Xbox World gear for one more cover rodeo. Hi-Fi Rush is definitely worth it.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Hi-Fi Rush
BEST BOX
Solid Snake's

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Contents

HI-FI RUSH

ISSUE 39
MAY 2024

048
Xbox hits PS5!
Let's see what booty we're sailing away with

“A TIMELY REMINDER THAT THE PRINTED WORD CARRIES WEIGHT AND MEANING.”
054 Pentiment

Regulars

018 In the mood for… balls
024 Replies
115 Next issue

Insider

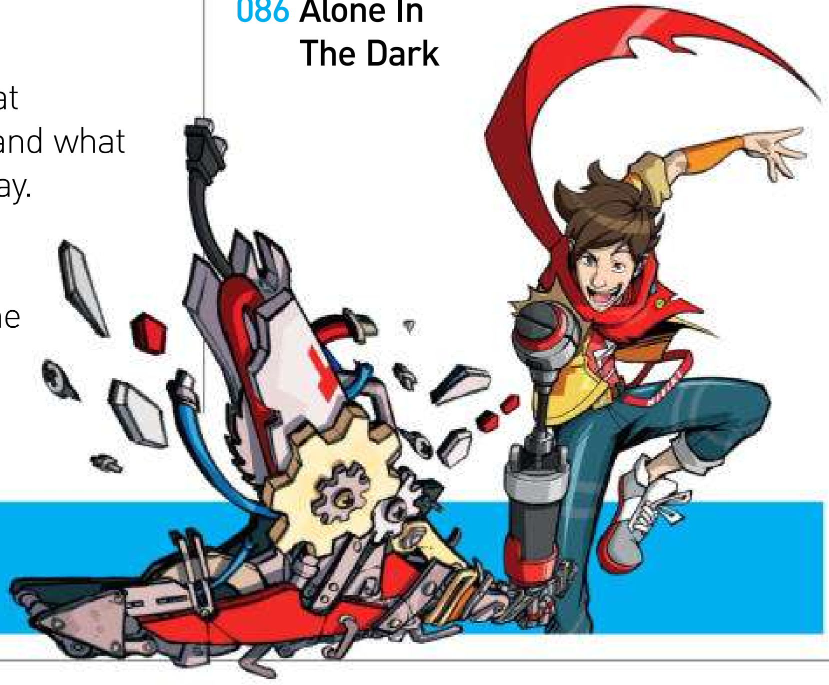
006 Unknown 9: Awakening
Anya 'Yennefer' Chalotra takes the lead role in a new game.
010 Elden Ring – Shadow Of The Erdtree
012 India Hero Project
PlayStation launches its latest incubator programme.
013 Ys X: Nordics
014 Tales Of Kenzera: Zau
016 Debate
020 Opinion #1
022 Opinion #2

Previews

028 Stellar Blade
Kaiju-fighting action.
032 Times & Galaxy
034 Until Then
038 Morbid: The Lords Of Ire
040 Zenless Zone Zero
044 Sand Land
046 Rise Of The Ronin

Features

048 Xbox On PS5
Xbox? Lootbox! See what PlayStation's grabbed, and what else might come our way.
060 Breaking The Cycle
The developer of the stylish In Stars And Time discusses their time-looping RPG.



056 Hi-Fi Rush

068 Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

028 Stellar Blade

Reviews

068 Final Fantasy VII Rebirth
076 The Outlast Trials
078 Classified: France '44
079 Balatro
080 Helldivers 2
082 Spirit Hunter: Death Mark II
083 A Little To The Left
084 Penny's Big Breakaway
086 Alone In The Dark
088 Stilt
089 Star Wars: Dark Forces Remaster
090 WWE 2K24
092 New Star GP
094 Little Cities: Bigger!
095 Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons Remake
096 Mediterranea Inferno
097 Under Night In-Birth II Sys:Celes
098 Skull And Bones
100 Hall of fame: PS5
102 Hall of fame: PS4
104 Hall of fame: PSVR

RetroStation

108 Memory card: Days Gone
109 Defend your hero: Matt Miller
110 Classic game: Tomb Raider III: Adventures Of Lara Croft
112 Plus points: Resistance: Retribution
113 A brief history of: stealth games
114 Parting shot: Celeste

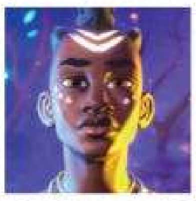
Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

> Novels, comics, a podcast; this transmedia project is just getting started.

INSIDER HIGHLIGHTS

10 **TREEMENDOUS**
Elden Ring to get Shadow Of The Erdtree DLC
12 **INDIA HERO PROJECT**
Meet the initiative's inaugural five games
14 **BENEATH THE MASK**
Actor Abubakar Salim on Tales Of Kenzera: Zau



Let's bring you into the Fold: Haroona's abilities come from an in-between space, offering both protection and destruction.

Reintroducing Unknown 9

Netflix Witcher star embarks on fresh fantasy adventure in Unknown 9: Awakening

Three years ago, the world got its first glimpse into the Fold. A teaser trailer shows a young girl fleeing from bullies, and just when we think she's cornered, she awakens to a strange power drawn from a peculiar liminal space. Time slows and the bullies' intended taunts play out as silvery blue ghosts. As the girl steps back into the present, she steps out of the path of her tormentors' strikes and up in their estimations.

This was our first introduction to the multimedia universe of Unknown 9. Already consisting of the Genesis trilogy of novels, the Torment comic book series, and even a scripted podcast called Out Of Sight, this transmedia project is just getting started. Emerging from the Fold is that same little girl, Haroona, now grown up and headlining her own game – Unknown 9: Awakening.

With an axe to grind after the murder of her mentor, Haroona embarks on a globe-trotting quest in this upcoming action adventure, slated for a summer 2024 release. What's more, Haroona is brought to life by actress Anya Chalotra, best known for playing Yennefer of Vengerberg in Netflix's take on The Witcher.

Head of production at developer Reflector Entertainment Jean-François Deschamps highlights that Chalotra's career has been defined by portrayals of strong women. "[Portraying Haroona] got to be a discussion," he shares, "and it ended up being a really, really fun collaboration that we had with her."

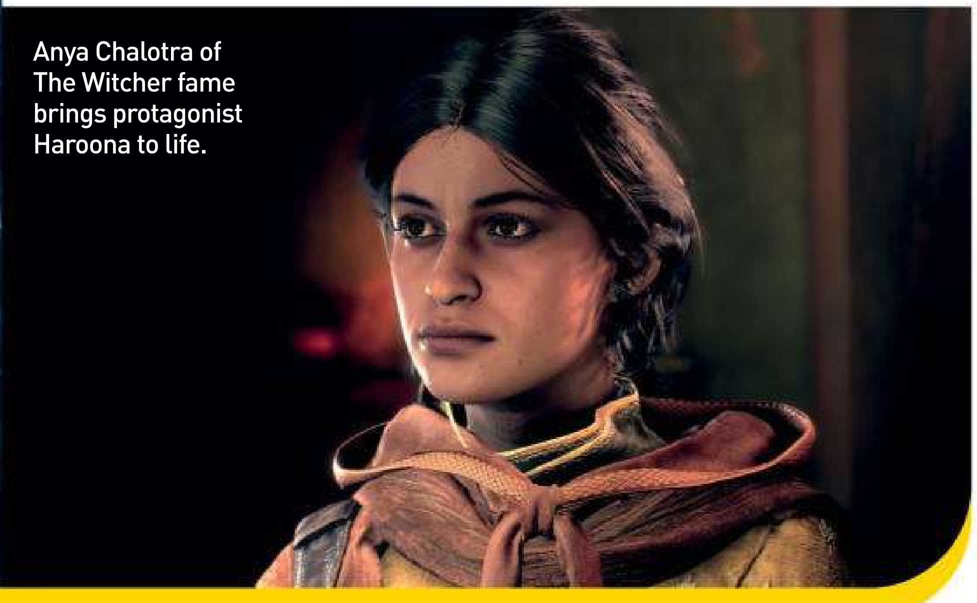
WAYS OF THE UNSEEN

Deschamps explains that Awakening is just one starting point of many for the Unknown 9 universe. "People don't need to look at everything to understand what's going [on]," he assures us, "Someone who just wants to play the game will have a fully fleshed-out experience."

Awakening has been in active development for close to four years, though the beginnings of its narrative universe are intertwined with the establishment of Reflector Entertainment in 2016. Deschamps joined Reflector about a year ago, after a decade in various production roles at Ubisoft Montreal. He tells us, "The idea at the core of [Reflector] was to do entertainment differently."

What connects every frond of this 'storyworld,' as Reflector describes it, are the Unknown Nine themselves – a chosen few given immortality in order to free the world from its cycle of destruction. Deschamps says, "We have different people with different points of view on how that should be done – should the Nine hoard the power? Should they not?"

> Actress Anya Chalotra's career has been defined by portrayals of strong women.



Anya Chalotra of The Witcher fame brings protagonist Haroona to life.

WE COULD BE HEROES

Haroona is just one of many heroes and heroines in the expansive Unknown 9 narrative universe. As it's a lore-rich 'storyworld,' you bet there's a proper noun for these protagonists: Quaestors. That's Latin for investigator, which intrigues us…

Secret societies the Ascendants and The Leap Year Society war over their differing answers to these questions. Our heroine Haroona begins on the periphery of all of this conflict in the year 1912 – and then the leader of The Ascendants, Victor Lechter, kills her mentor. While she's well attuned to the Fold and the abilities it affords, exacting vengeance is far from straightforward. For starters, her powers are not exactly unique in this universe.

GETTING PRESSED

"Technically, we all have access to it – like, everyone in the universe can, to some extent, have access to it," Deschamps says. "Some of them not enough. Some of them [have developed a] really, really, really deep [connection to the Fold]."

To survive this fight, Haroona must tactically deploy everything her late mentor taught her. As such, combat offers a range of options. Deschamp describes the team's combat design ethos, saying, "One thing that is important for us is to really let the player experience the game as they wish; some players really love getting into a fight and [being] really brawly about it – it's fun to do – [and] some players like to be a bit more discreet, a bit more stealthy."

Following The Ascendants' trail of destruction, Haroona can choose her moments to pick off their rank and file. On top of diving in and out of cover for typical takedowns, her connection to the Fold allows her to step out of her own body for short bursts to wreak havoc among The Ascendants' underlings.

To begin with, Haroona can 'step' into and possess one or two enemies in sequence; for instance she can hijack a sniper, fire on their comrade, and then hop into another nearby footsoldier to shank another with their bayonet. As you pour skill points into this ability, not only can you extend this chain of mayhem, you can increase how much damage you deliver with every successive step.

Towards the end of the game you'll be able to hop, skip, and jump through four enemies in a row. This results in a chain reaction that Deschamps describes as ending in a "firework," where you witness these manipulated combatants each meeting their sticky ends in sequence.

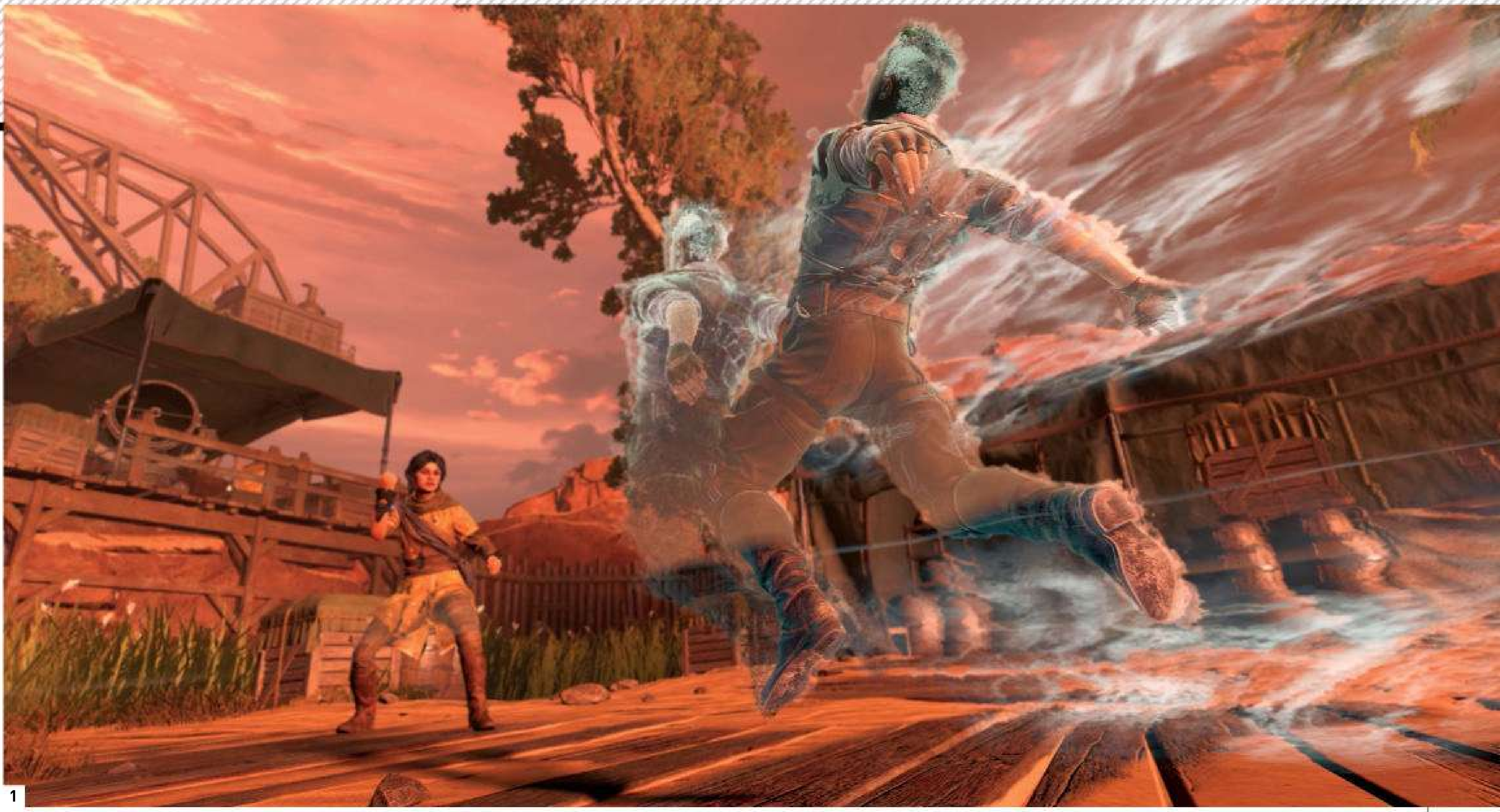
As those still standing shout for backup, you can continue to hide in the shadows, using the Fold either to cast temporary invisibility on yourself or to highlight nearby combatants. Haroona can harness the Fold for defensive abilities, too, such as bending space into a spectral buckler or, as Deschamps says, getting a bit 'brawly' with it. For instance, she can telekinetically pick up and hurl enemies, before delivering a beatdown with her own two fists. If you'd rather not get your hands dirty, you could fling your foes into their own incendiary traps – or reach through the Fold to rip their essence right out of their body.

Haroona is not to be trifled with. Victor Lechter and The Ascendants won't know what hit them this summer on PS5.

> **Haroona's connection to the Fold allows her to step out of her own body for short bursts to wreak havoc.**

✱ You can step into Haroona's world at https://unknown9.com

Haroona's quest is one of revenge, though she does not walk alone. One memorable mission sees her partnering up to sabotage a zeppelin.



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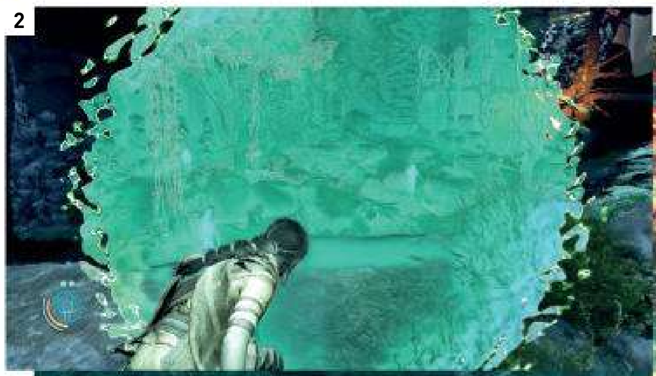

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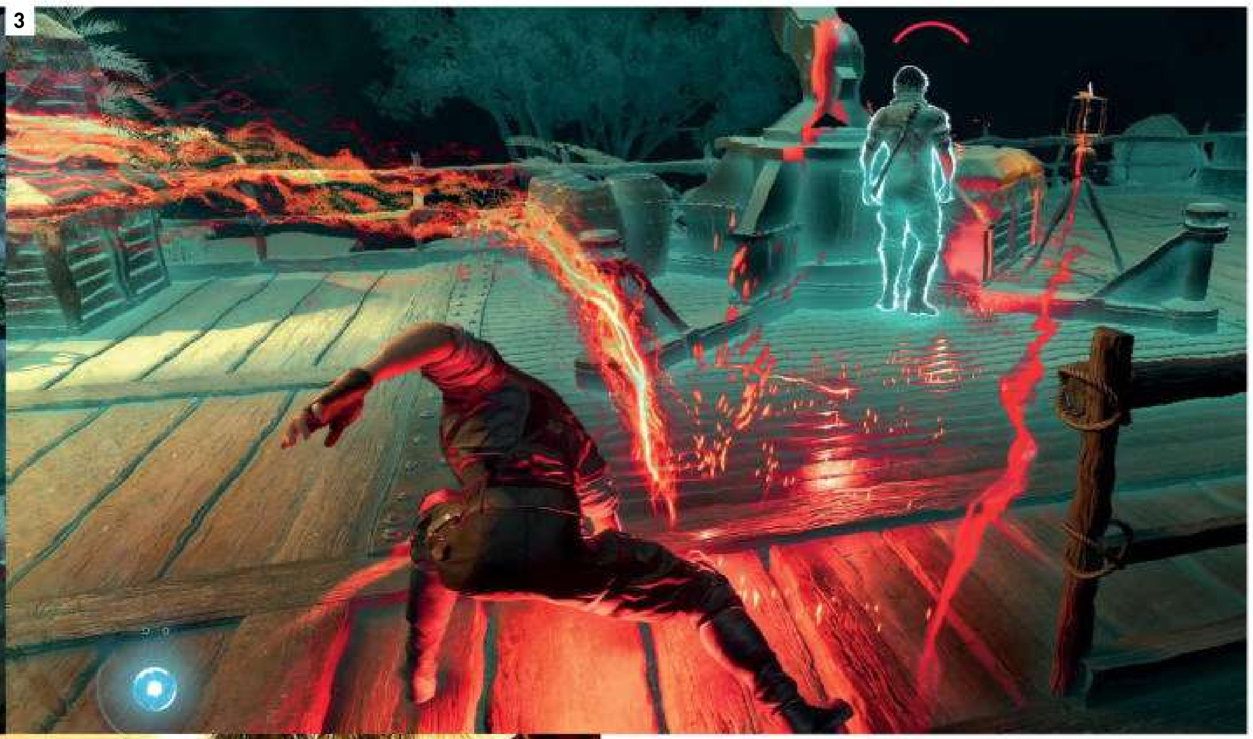

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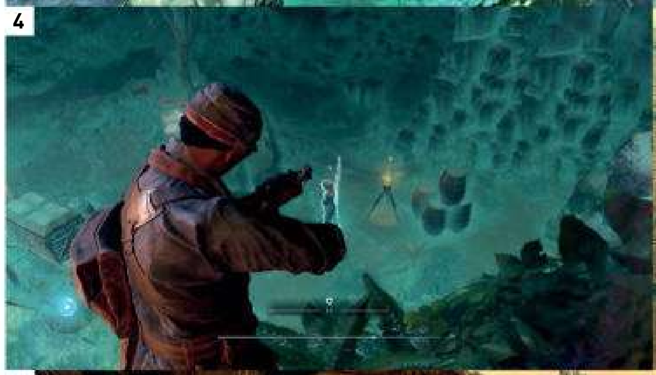

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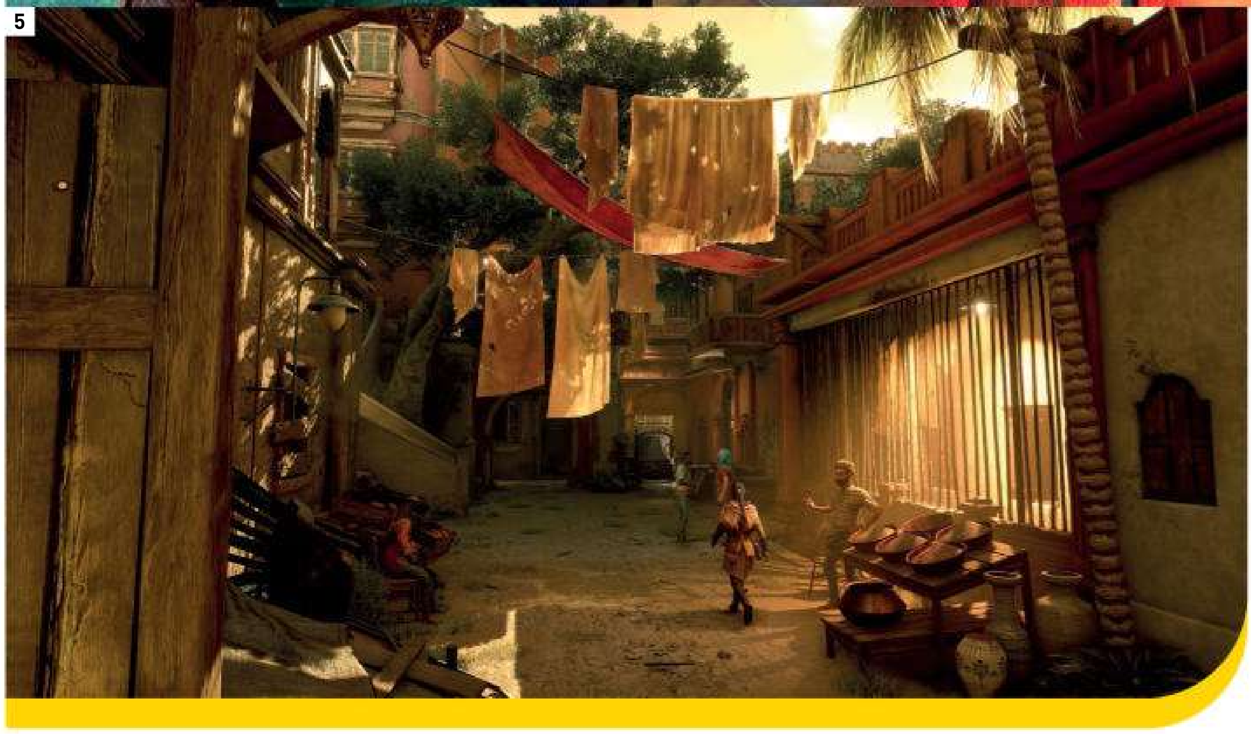
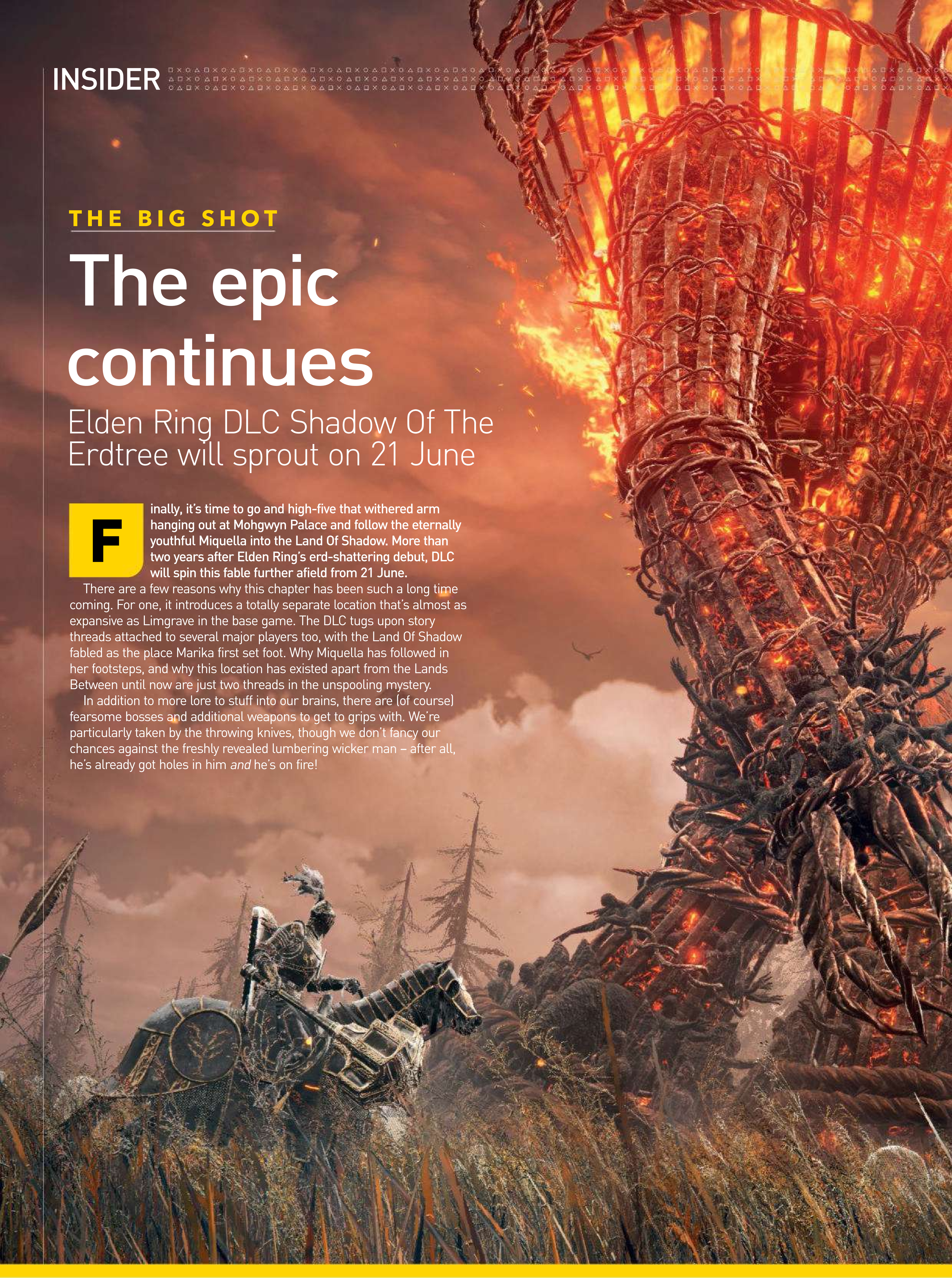


5

1 The element of surprise is key, but there's little stopping you from jumping straight into the fray. Better yet, why not bring your foes to you? **2** If you're keen on playing stealthily, peeking through the Fold will help you keep enemies at arm's length. **3** Haroona can 'step' out of her body and into enemies, possessing them for a brief window to wreak havoc on their allies. **4** Under the guise of 'active stealth,' combat sees you using the Fold to possess enemies or fling them into their own explosive traps before slipping back into the shadows. **5** Though her tale begins in India, Haroona's quest will have far reaching ripples across the Unknown 9 universe.



THE BIG SHOT

The epic continues

Elden Ring DLC Shadow Of The Erdtree will sprout on 21 June

Finally, it's time to go and high-five that withered arm hanging out at Mohgwyn Palace and follow the eternally youthful Miquella into the Land Of Shadow. More than two years after Elden Ring's erd-shattering debut, DLC will spin this fable further afield from 21 June.

There are a few reasons why this chapter has been such a long time coming. For one, it introduces a totally separate location that's almost as expansive as Limgrave in the base game. The DLC tugs upon story threads attached to several major players too, with the Land Of Shadow fabled as the place Marika first set foot. Why Miquella has followed in her footsteps, and why this location has existed apart from the Lands Between until now are just two threads in the unspooling mystery.

In addition to more lore to stuff into our brains, there are (of course) fearsome bosses and additional weapons to get to grips with. We're particularly taken by the throwing knives, though we don't fancy our chances against the freshly revealed lumbering wicker man – after all, he's already got holes in him *and* he's on fire!

Numbers Game

We do the maths

4,800

Minutes more in Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance than the original, non-PlayStation release, making it about 160 hours in total.

50

Hours and more of STALKER released right before we went to the printer, as the FPS trilogy makes its long-awaited PlayStation debut.

500,000

Copies of Balatro have sold already. That's a whole lot of poker hands played, and that's no joke(r).

02

Games in the new Star Wars: Battlefront Classic Collection – both PS2 force-siblings are present.

2,000,000

Players have entered the ring in Tekken 8. Taking them all on would take a fair bit of time.

700

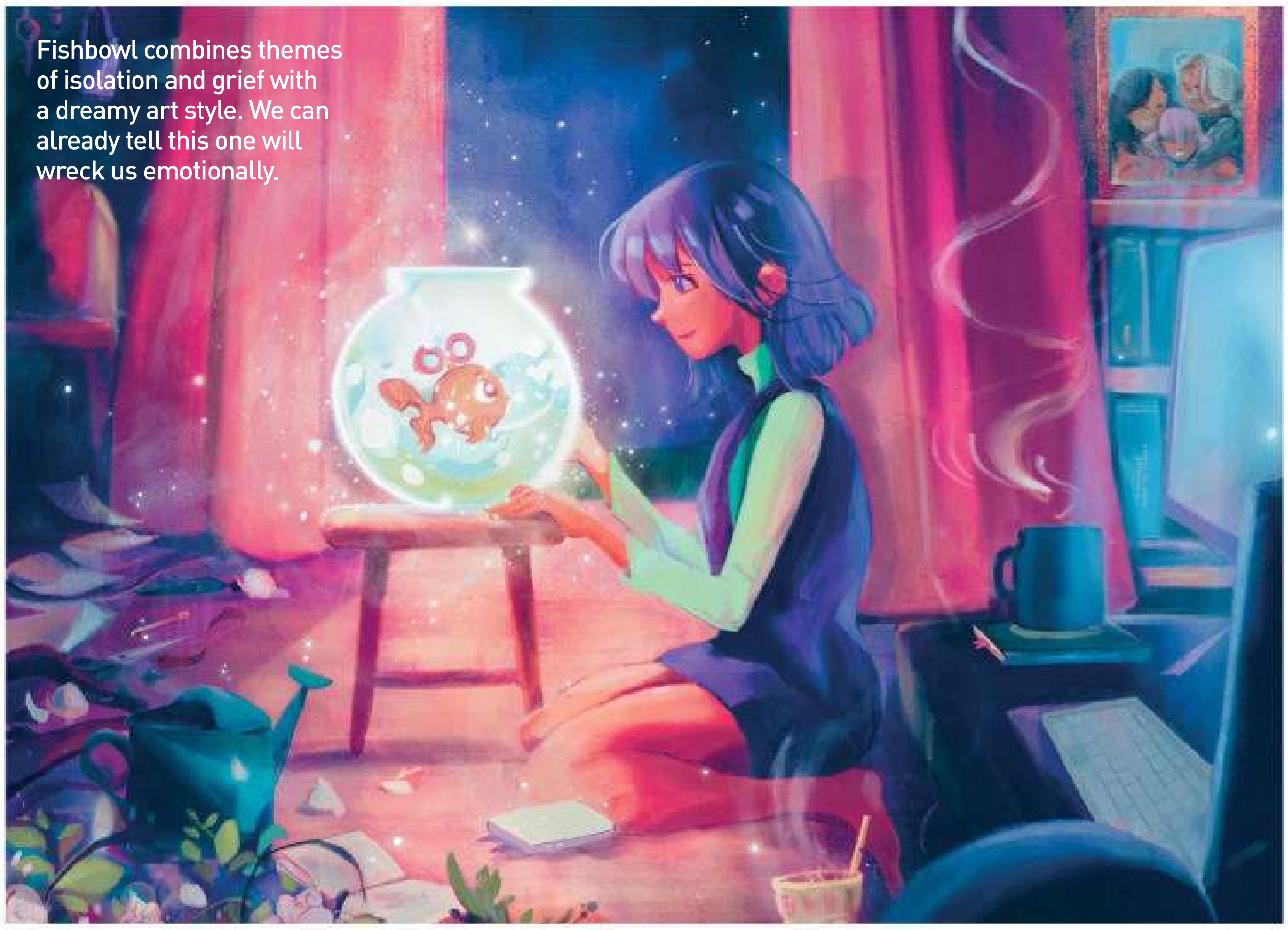
-Plus weeks between Epic Mickey's Nintendo launch in 2010 and the upcoming Epic Mickey Rebrushed.

DEVELOPING FUTURES

This isn't Sony's first talent incubator programme. The publisher launched the China Hero Project in 2016, leading to the release of FIST: Forged In Shadow Torch, and also elevating initially smaller projects like Lost Soul Aside.

Incredible India

Sony announces India Hero Project, highlighting five fresh games



Fishbowl combines themes of isolation and grief with a dreamy art style. We can already tell this one will wreck us emotionally.

We know that games are loved the world over, though some regions' developers get more attention than others. Helping to correct the imbalance, Sony's India Hero Project began last May, inviting pitches from devs across the country. Five projects have been selected for Sony's new talent incubation programme.

First to catch our eye is coming-of-age tale Fishbowl, made by two-person team imissmyfriends.studio. Protagonist Alo has secured a video editing job in the city but, working from home having just lost her grandmother, is often alone with her grief. The game sees you arranging video clips via a rhythm game, sorting through your grandmother's belongings á la Unpacking, and roving through a strange dream dimension at night…

MADE FOR THIS

Also boasting killer style is Requital: Gates Of Blood from Holy Cow Productions. Drawing upon Egyptian mythology, this 2D action platformer side-scrolls through boss rushes in the underworld of Duat. As protagonist Zahrah tears a path through gods of the afterlife and the beasties that do their bidding, everything from characters to environments is lovingly rendered with hand-drawn art.

Bringing tension to a new dimension is Mukti from Underdogs Studio. Set in a museum, this exploration-focussed experience makes you confront just what it cost to get hold of the exhibits.

On a lighter note, there's developer Tathvamasi's musical metroidvania. Suri: The Seventh Note sets the scene within a mythical India, full of floating Himalayan temples and many more fantastical locations. As you duck and weave between platforms, everything moves to the same musical beat, including enemies.

Everything mentioned so far has been confirmed for release on both PS5 and PC at some point. However, Meteora: The Race Against Space Time from Big Boot Games is unique in that it's coming to PSVR2 as well. An arcadey, futuristic combat racer, the option to hurtle through space in virtual reality makes sense. It feels like a good representative for the India Hero Project as a whole too – after all, these five developers are shooting for the moon with their projects, and have already landed among the stars.

Find out more at www.playstation.com/en-in/local/india-hero-project

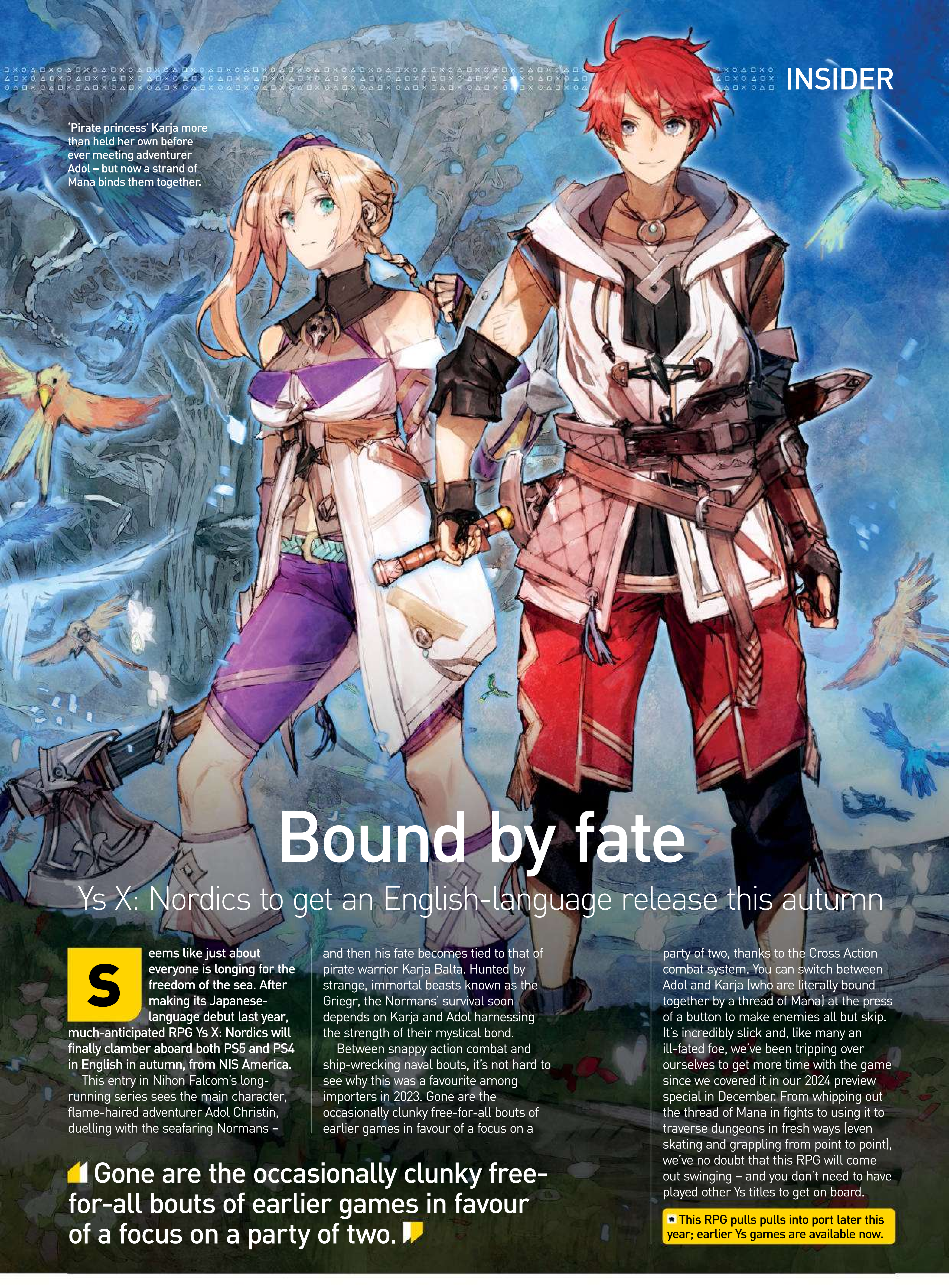
PlayStation voices

The month in mouthing off

"MY GIRLFRIENDS (PLURAL) WERE THE CUTEST – I ALMOST FELT BAD FOR GOING OUT WITH ALL OF THEM (YES, I WENT FOR THE DIRTBAG ROUTE)." RAPPER LOTUS JUICE ON FINISHING PERSONA 3 RELOAD.

"WITH OUR FIRST-EVER SCREEN READER, WE COVER NOT ONLY THE SETTINGS BUT THE FNSM APP AND ALL THE TOUCH PAD MENUS." SPIDER-MAN 2 ACCESSIBILITY DESIGN RESEARCHER SAM SCHAFFEL ON THE UPDATES TO THE GAME'S FEATURES.

"I HAVE RECENTLY REGISTERED IN DISNEY PLUS, HERE ARE MY RECOMMENDATIONS." HIDEO KOJIMA PICKS: MOON KNIGHT, SHOGUN, AND… HIS OWN HIDEO KOJIMA: CONNECTING WORLDS DOC!?



'Pirate princess' Karja more than held her own before ever meeting adventurer Adol – but now a strand of Mana binds them together.

Bound by fate

Ys X: Nordics to get an English-language release this autumn

Seems like just about everyone is longing for the freedom of the sea. After making its Japanese-language debut last year, much-anticipated RPG Ys X: Nordics will finally clamber aboard both PS5 and PS4 in English in autumn, from NIS America.

This entry in Nihon Falcom's long-running series sees the main character, flame-haired adventurer Adol Christin, duelling with the seafaring Normans – and then his fate becomes tied to that of pirate warrior Karja Balta. Hunted by strange, immortal beasts known as the Griegr, the Normans' survival soon depends on Karja and Adol harnessing the strength of their mystical bond.

Between snappy action combat and ship-wrecking naval bouts, it's not hard to see why this was a favourite among importers in 2023. Gone are the occasionally clunky free-for-all bouts of earlier games in favour of a focus on a party of two, thanks to the Cross Action combat system. You can switch between Adol and Karja (who are literally bound together by a thread of Mana) at the press of a button to make enemies all but skip. It's incredibly slick and, like many an ill-fated foe, we've been tripping over ourselves to get more time with the game since we covered it in our 2024 preview special in December. From whipping out the thread of Mana in fights to using it to traverse dungeons in fresh ways (even skating and grappling from point to point), we've no doubt that this RPG will come out swinging – and you don't need to have played other Ys titles to get on board.

> **Gone are the occasionally clunky free-for-all bouts of earlier games in favour of a focus on a party of two.**

This RPG pulls pulls into port later this year; earlier Ys games are available now.

DEV ACCESS

Son and moon

Actor-turned-dev Abubakar Salim on how metroidvania **Tales Of Kenzera: Zau**'s channels his personal experience of grief

Videogames have always been a huge part of Abubakar Salim's life; Kingdom Hearts was, for him, an early example of games being a powerful storytelling medium just like books, film, or television. But back then, popping a disc into a PlayStation felt like magic – it didn't seem possible that games could be a career.

At least not until he got his acting break as Bayek, the lead character in Assassin's Creed Origins. "I realised there is an actual world behind the game experience that you go through and people actually make games," he says. "Talking to some of the developers and then learning about their journey into games really sparked my interest of looking into actually making a game for myself."

It was a few more years before the actor felt he had the confidence to tell his own story, but having founded his studio, Surgent Studios, in 2020, Salim's now set to release his debut, Tales Of Kenzera: Zau. And he's not shying away from vulnerability; he's telling a story inspired by his own experience of losing his father to cancer more than ten years ago. "If I want to tell my own story, I always treat it like I have one shot to do it, so I have to be honest and truthful – that's essentially why Zau was the story that I wanted to tell," he explains.

You can see the direct parallel as the title character Zau (voiced by Salim) is a young warrior shaman experiencing the same loss, a healer unable to perform his duties when he is himself in need of healing. However, he strikes a bargain with the God Of Death (a more benevolent-seeming figure than you might expect with that name) to bring his Baba back, leading to a journey through the beautiful but treacherous lands of Kenzera. The Afro-futurist setting is also a tribute to his father, inspired by Bantu culture, and more specifically by the stories his father used to tell him. "My grandfather was an Nganga, a traditional healer who was able to talk to spirits," he adds. "We also pull these other cool mythologies and create this melting pot where we touch upon all these different spaces and meet these different creatures and gods."

> We've been inspired by metroidvania as a whole because it's never a straight path.

Grief is a theme that has been explored by some notable indies in recent years, though you shouldn't go in expecting a game that's all about experiencing sadness through five metaphorical stages of grief. "I'm still on this journey of grief, it kind of fluctuates: one day you might be okay with it, the next you might not be, some days you might feel angry, some days you might feel sad, some days you feel relieved," he explains. "That's what I wanted to explore with Zau, the idea that it isn't always a straight path. It's why we've been inspired by metroidvania as a whole because it's never a straight path."

BEHIND THE MASKS

Despite the apparently heavy themes, Zau isn't intended to weigh you down with sadness but instead to get you to reflect on how chaotic grief can be, and so our young shaman's traversal and combat abilities have a fast-paced, kinetic quality, not too dissimilar from Sargon's in Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown. The way Zau interacts in Kenzera is by switching between two masks: the Sun mask, which is constructed for melee-based combat; and the Moon mask, which allows him to fire projectiles. This mechanic is linked to the process of grieving, thinking of the masks we wear to cope or simply to get through the day.

"Whenever someone is grieving, there's a kind of loss of control, but by being aware that you're grieving you have some form of control, so playing in that kind of space where there is an element of freedom but also control is something that we really wanted to layer within the game design," Salim explains. "That's essentially the grieving process, just being alive."

Abubakar Salim is best known for playing Bayek in Assassin's Creed Origins.

The masks themselves have their own skill trees as new abilities are unlocked to help Zau get further in his journey. The first of these is the ability to freeze water, enabling him to run across strong currents of water and even wall-jump off a frozen waterfall. There may be a personal and emotional narrative here but Salim believes it's just as important for the action to feel satisfying and impactful.

"I remember playing Dead Cells at the time, and that was the same feeling that I want to pass on to people," he says. "You've got to respect the medium. As a game, people are going to be interacting with this, that minute to minute is so important that you can't necessarily forget about that. As Josef Fares always says, marry story with gameplay, and you're winning."

Get ready to mask up and enter Tales Of Kenzera: Zau on PS5 on 23 April.

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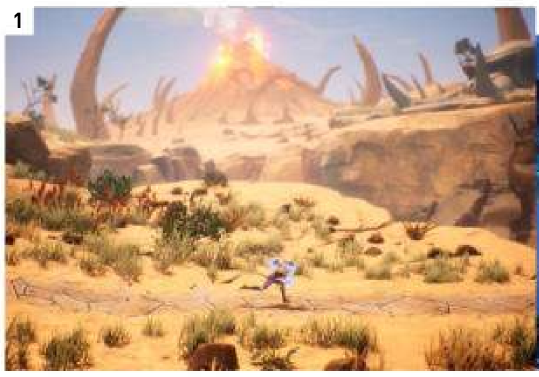

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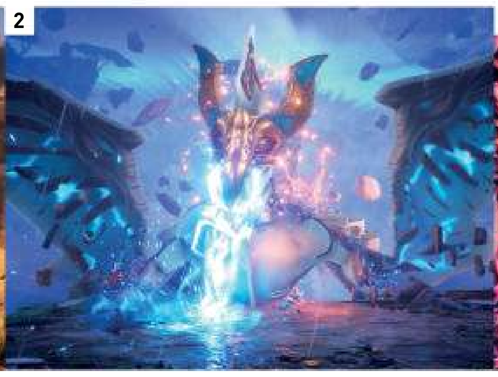

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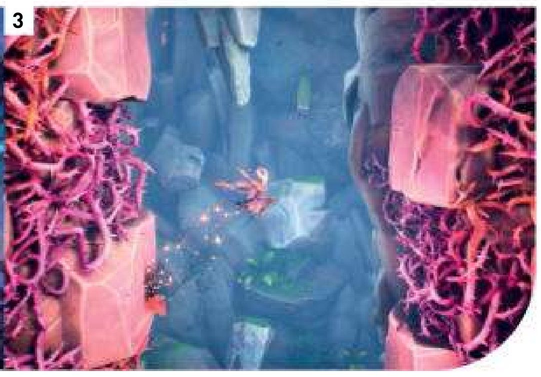

1 The 2.5 perspective gives depth to Kenzera's environments. 2 Saving your Baba will involve overcoming powerful gods. 3 Zau starts with decent abilities – no need to unlock double jump or wall jump.

As a healer, Zau's actions in combat can be framed as giving restless spirits peace, while he undertakes his own journey of growth.

DEBATE

Which game do we want to see adapted for TV next?

Fallout is getting a streaming series on Amazon Prime Video - what should follow suit?

MILFORD COPPOCK
MANAGING ART EDITOR

"WHILE THERE'S BEEN TALK OF A METAL GEAR MOVIE FOR YEARS, IT'S JUST TOO COMPLEX TO FIT INTO A TWO-HOUR FILM."

Let's face it, there would be an awful lot of *plot* to fit into a crowd-pleasing MGS movie. What it needs is a TV adaptation that allows Kojima's somewhat-convoluted stealth series the space it needs to tell anything *resembling* a cohesive story. How else could you explain the backstories/betrayals/double-/triple-crossings? A longer-form medium like TV would allow the characters the space to breathe and better develop, without frassling the minds of the Saturday afternoon multiplex crowd. ■

> TV would allow MGS' characters the space to breathe and develop.

MIRIAM MCDONALD
OPERATIONS EDITOR

"THAT'S THE SECOND BIGGEST MONKEY HEAD... ER, I MEAN PIRATE SHOW I'VE EVER SEEN."

The logical thing to adapt is a point-and-click game because the script's right there. While I considered the Broken Sword series of games, really, Monkey Island's the one to adapt. With Our Flag Means Death sent to TV's version of Davy Jones's locker, The Secret Of Monkey Island would have the comedy-pirate high seas to itself. And having been really enjoying Fargo lately and loved the wackiness of Legion in the past, let's get Noah Hawley on board and make it one for grownups. Let's make it [*Don't say it* – ed] ARRRR!-rated. [**sigh** – ed] ■

OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR

"IF WE CAN'T GET A SEQUEL TO THE ORDER 1886 AS A GAME, THEN PERHAPS AS A TV SHOW?"

You know I'd usually pick Sonic, but with the Knuckles spin-off coming to TV screens later this year, this videogame adaptation renaissance has already pre-empted me. Perhaps that just goes to show how good we've got it.

Given The Order 1886 fans like me have been waiting almost a decade to see what happens after that game's cliffhanger, I'd love to see the story shift media to TV instead, both to adapt and then to blaze past that game's story. It'd fit in well alongside other supernatural alternate history shows. Getting to see the Round Table investigate odd creatures lurking in steampunk London would be a treat, as would unravelling the conspiracies that Sir Galahad becomes embroiled in. With creative gadgets from Nikola Tesla, this could straddle monster-of-the-week with a larger narrative in a way like little else. ■

JESSICA KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR

"I'M STILL YEARNING FOR TWISTS AND TURNS."

Since diving into Labyrinth Of Galleria: The Moon Society last year, I have been really annoying about it. Besides being the most inventive dungeon crawler I've played in years, its twisty twin-protagonist plot has its hooks in me still. Adapting such a spiralling story would be no easy feat, especially as all that dungeon crawling is so core to the experience – perhaps an anime with almost 100 episodes would be the only even vaguely realistic way to go about adapting it for TV. There's certainly no way it could be crammed into a movie lasting a couple of hours. But given the game boasts a female-fronted cast of memorable weirdos, is it really any wonder I'm desperate for a fresh opportunity to be really annoying about them all? ■

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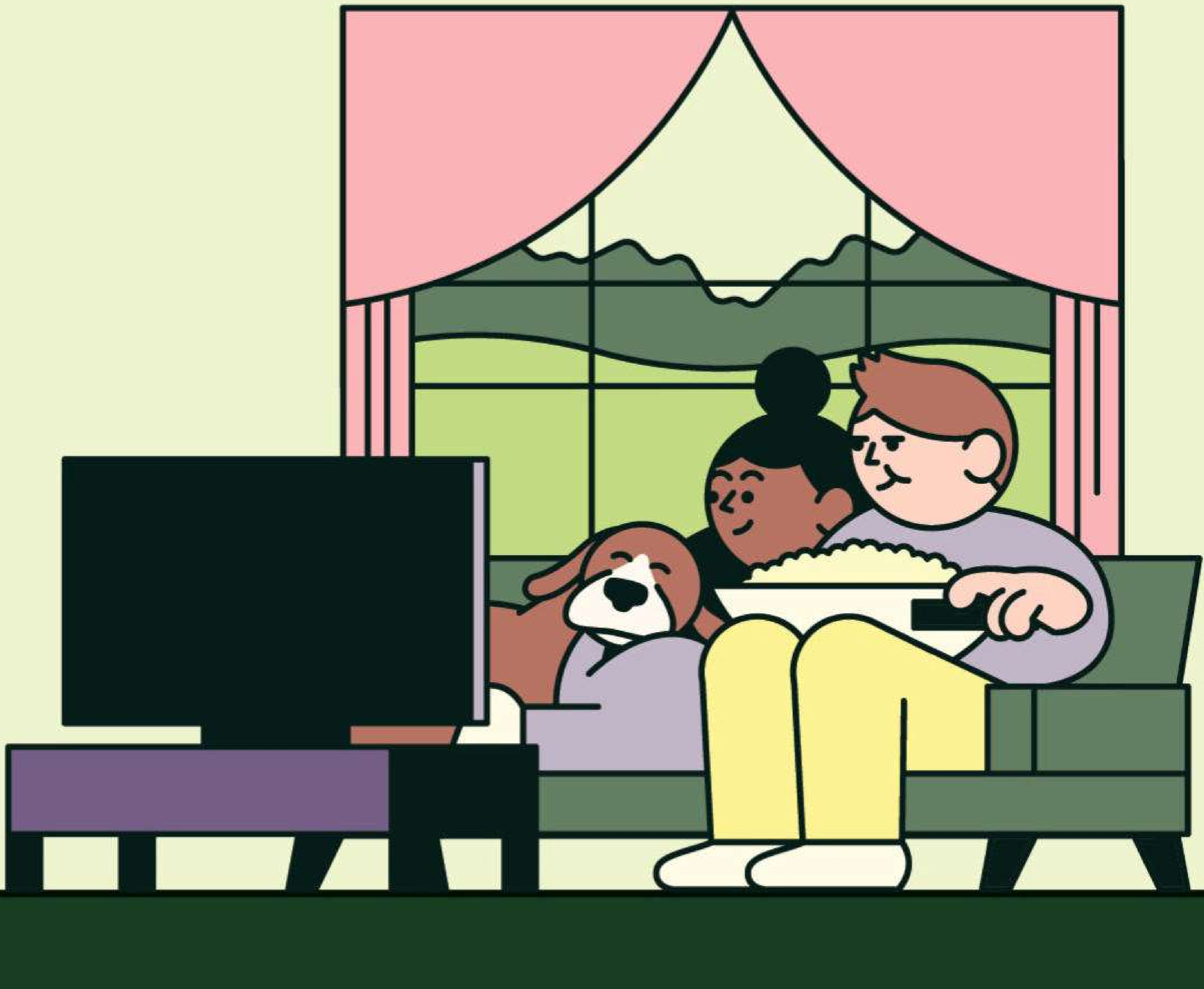

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IN THE MOOD FOR...

Balls

Games sure to endure for years thanks to their memorable spheres

1 FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3

This brawler utilises balls in a manner best described as 'unexpected'. Turn off Illegal Blow Disqualifications and it's possible to ascend to the International Championship by repeatedly hammering haymakers into your opponent's crotch. With slo-mo replays. Eye watering.

2 MAGIC ORBZ

Wall-basher Breakout inspired what is almost certainly the best PS3 indie you never played. Use your bat to knock out bricks in environments themed around pirates, witches, and knights, while grabbing power-ups like fireballs and multi-balls. Two decades on it's still fun.

3 STREET FIGHTER II

It's not only sports games that rely on flying spheres. One reason for Street Fighter's staying power is the ability to fling magical orbs at rivals. Ryu's Hadoken, Sagat's Tiger Shot, and Dhalsim's Yoga Fire are among the most iconic attacks in gaming history. Apologies to Guile, though: the Sonic Boom feels more boomerang than ball.

4 ESPN NFL 2K5

Balls don't have to be round to feature in a classic. This all-time great is about slinging an inflated oval around the gridiron, and remains beloved to this day. Why do so many proclaim it better than Madden? Easy: greater tactical depth and a half-time show that really did feel like watching a TV broadcast.

5 STRAY

Basketball needs some sort of presence here, but NBA Live and NBA 2K feel a bit predictable. Step forward the greatest cat sim of 2022, or indeed any year. Search the slums to find a b-ball which, when dunked in the waste basket, earns you the Boom Chat Kalaka trophy. Neat.

6 DEAD TO RIGHTS: RETRIBUTION

Games have largely moved on from testicular humour, but we still have to acknowledge their role in this PS2 blaster. Put simply, your canine sidekick Shadow is obsessed with ball-biting. There's even a trophy for nailing a groin-based takedown. It's called Scrotality. Oof.

7 FIFA 23

Love or hate EA's footie series, it retired as the most successful ball-based videogame ever. FIFA sold over 325 million copies during its rollercoaster history. The final edition even threw in some Ultimate Team curiosities, such as the option to utilise a doughnut, cushion, or watermelon.

8 ROCKET LEAGUE

The greatest mix of vehicles and balls since the notorious Madden ambulance ran players over in the NFL series' early years. Fling your car towards the goal to score a last-minute winner – or fling your DualShock across the living room when an online opponent does that exact same thing.

9 SNIPER ELITE V2

Again we're flashing back to a bygone era, but it's necessary to do so – because one of Sniper Elite 2's marketing pulls was the opportunity to gun down Hitler. Between the legs. Using an X-ray kill cam. With no detail spared. Just like that, we're no longer in the mood for balls.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

South Park: The Stick Of Truth
Balls are a main focus of this hilarious RPG. Indeed, throughout you're repeatedly warned never to fart on… well, you can guess.

Heavy Rain
One of the four main characters, Madison, squeezes a man's bits as a means of torture in Quantic Dream's interactive tale.

MLB The Show 23
Fairly conventional in its ball use, but also the most consistent sports series in PlayStation history. A perennial home run.

Did we miss your favourite spherical plaything? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

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SAGAT
Player1

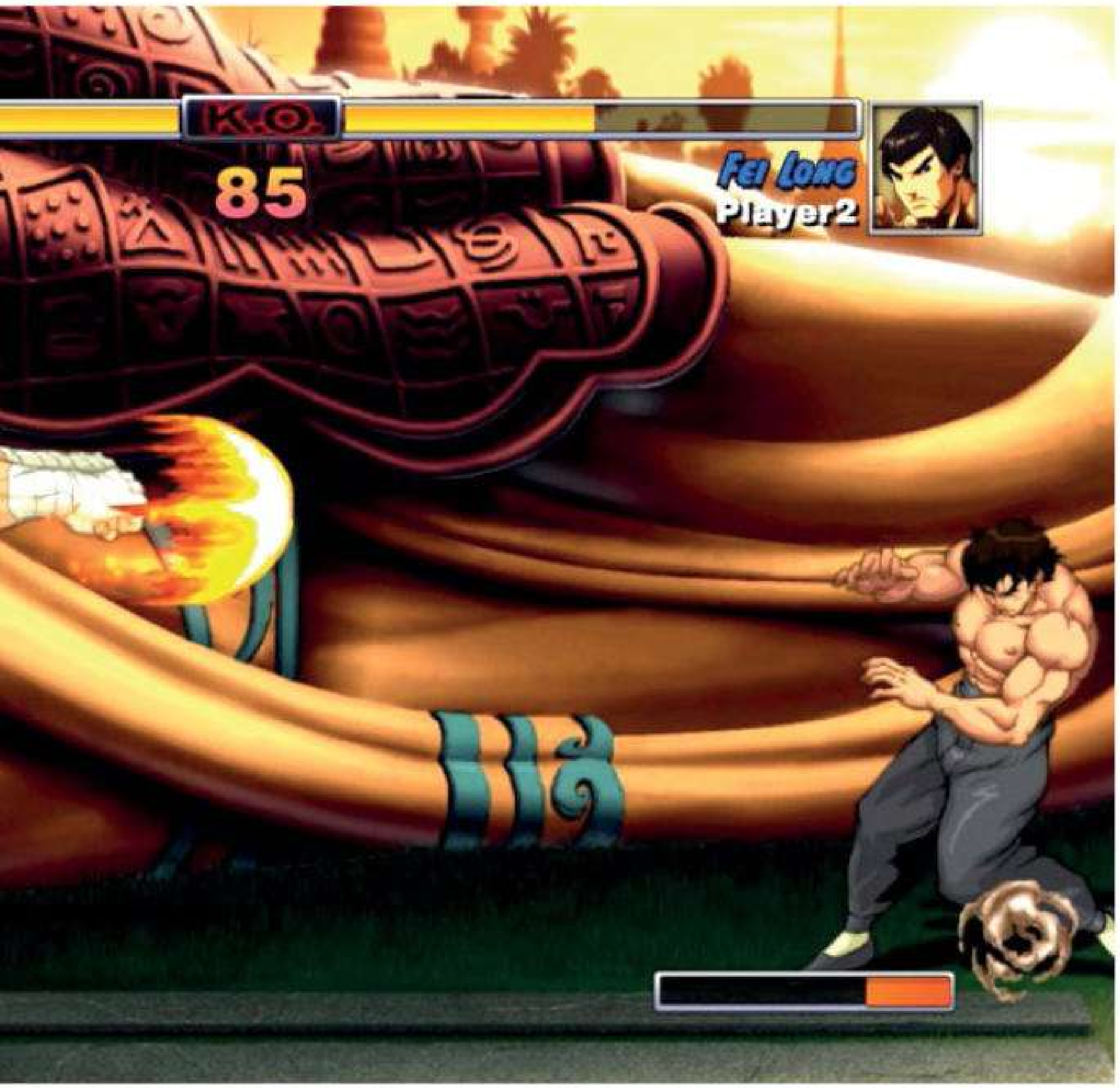
4

5

6

7

"SOLD OVER 325 MILLION COPIES DURING ITS LIFETIME."


K.O.
85
Fei Long
Player2

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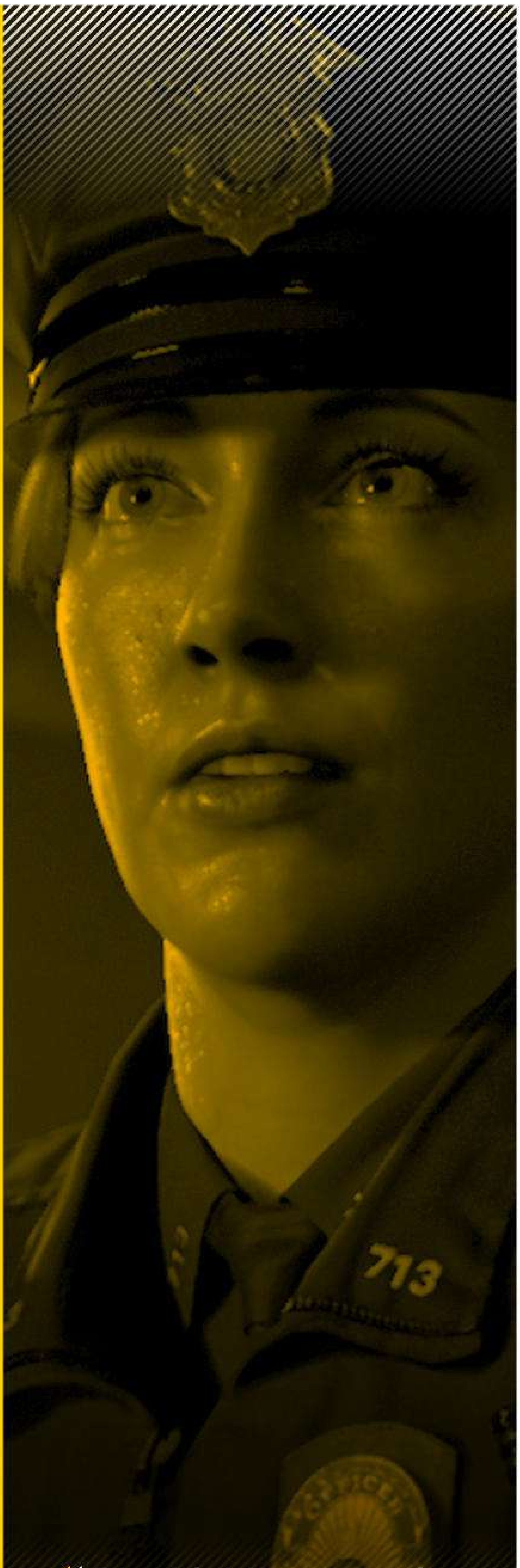


PlayLink's constraints are what really keep it inside the box.

OPINION

"UNTIL DAWN SHOULD STAY UNDER COVER; I WANT A REMAKE OF HIDDEN AGENDA."

The only thing that needs to stay out of sight in this investigation is PlayLink

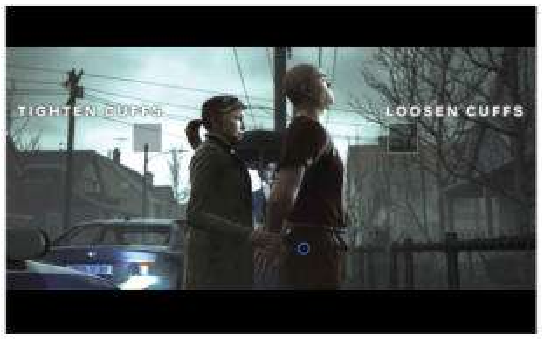
WRITER BIO
When it comes to a thriller, Vic Pheasey's pretty good at catching the culprit. The QuickTime Events, however? Not so much.

When Ballistic Moon's rebuild of Until Dawn was revealed in a recent State Of Play, my first question was the same as many others' – *why*? Although I'm a huge fan of the original from Supermassive Games, I don't deem a lick of paint and an extension necessary. Hidden Agenda, however, is far more worthy of that treatment.

This ripple-effect crime-thriller was developed for PlayLink; it tasks you with hunting down 'The Trapper' killer, solo or competitively with friends. One thought remains strong for me all these years later – why isn't it as celebrated as its decision-making counterparts? Hidden Agenda was far from a standard interactive parlour game; its difference in genre alone was already a redeeming quality. But sadly, only being able to use a laggy app to play through such an intriguing story really hampered it. Interacting with a thriller in this manner *can* work, but in forcing us to step out of the characters' shoes and giving us minimal control, PlayLink really diluted the experience. And I feel that this is why Hidden Agenda gets put back on the shelf with all the other cold cases.

The characters' backstories hold far too much weight to be skimmed over as they are in the experience delivered to you via PlayLink. To play through Jonathan Finn's flashbacks or tensely pad through the night of Becky Marney's initial discoveries would be far more suspenseful and thrilling if we were able to move freely using the DualSense. Clunkily dragging your finger over your phone to find an obvious clue just cheapens the experience, detracting from what makes this twisted tale so brilliant.

What I'm asking for could seem a little pie-in-the-sky, especially given that a fair few people either don't resonate with Hidden Agenda or simply have no clue that it exists alongside the other offerings the studio has released in recent years. But all that's proving my point. Narratively, the game stands tall with Supermassive's other titles – PlayLink's constraints are what really keep it inside the box.



Unlike in Until Dawn, the only monsters in Hidden Agenda are the ones who walk among us.

NOT APPY

Nowadays the companion app is at best sluggish and at worst, if you have an Android phone running an OS newer than Android 9, no longer available to new players. And that's extremely problematic when that's the only option for playing this game.

A remake would not only make Hidden Agenda more accessible, it would remind both original and newer players how much this entry deserves a seat at the head of the table. With the success of The Dark Pictures Anthology, repackaging Hidden Agenda to fit into the series would really reaffirm to audiences just how strong this story is. Given how dark the other tales are, it's not as if it's twisty plot couldn't slot straight into that wonderous collection of nightmare fuel. Plus, with society's obsession with true crime shows and fictional thrillers at an all-time high, it's surprising to me that it's not mirrored as much in gaming, outside of the usual studios nailing horror. So please, let us head back into the evidence locker and reopen 'The Trapper' case and *really* see how this pans out, in the remake that Hidden Agenda so rightfully deserves.

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It's time RGG Studio brought our boy back as a lead.

OPINION

"THE LIKE A DRAGON STAGE IS SET FOR ANOTHER COMPELLING SIDE-STORY."

One series protagonist has been away from the spotlight for too long

WRITER BIO
James Daly is a writer, editor, and producer at Future, working on the Future Games Show. A fan of RPGs, he's enjoying 2024.

Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth arrived in January to critical acclaim, bringing original series lead Kazuma Kiryu back as one of two playable protagonists. Sharing the load with Ichiban Kasuga in this turn-based RPG, Kiryu has an arc predominantly focused on nostalgia, with plenty of reminiscing to be had. (We should give you a **spoiler warning** before we discuss some of the strolls down Memory Lane, Kamurocho).

One of our favourite moments in Kiryu's side-quests involves the return of Shun Akiyama, a fan-favourite character who debuted in Yakuza 4 as a playable cast member, sharing the main role for two games before appearing again in Yakuza 6: Song Of Life in a supporting role.

Akiyama is a lovable, caring moneylender (if you can imagine such a thing!), in charge of Sky Finance, a company that doesn't charge interest, which is easily the most far-fetched thing in the Like A Dragon series. With his heart of gold, fashion sense, and ability to crush almost anyone in a fight, Akiyama stole hearts as a blend of Kazuma Kiryu and his deceased oath-brother Akira Nishikiyama. When he returns in Infinite Wealth in Kiryu's memory quests, it's one of the game's strongest moments for longtime series fans like myself, revealing the respect Kiryu has for him, as well as how his never-say-die spirit remains intact. This cameo proves our kindhearted millionaire has been missed, so it's time Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio did the right thing and brought our boy back as a lead.

TOWER BATTLE

The brawler style of previous Yakuza/LAD titles still has a place in the contemporary gaming space.

SKY'S THE LIMIT

The success of Like A Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name proved the brawler style of previous Yakuza/Like A Dragon titles still has a place in the contemporary gaming space, so it's not impossible to imagine more instalments in this style. Taking that into consideration, along with Akiyama's popularity, the logical conclusion would be to give him his own Gaiden, perhaps telling his story between Yakuza 6 and Infinite Wealth.

In addition to giving us all another ride with an icon, a brawler game like this could solve one of Sega's apparent problems. The company's two detective spinoffs – Judgment and Lost Judgment – star Takayuki Yagami, played by Takuya Kimura, but two years ago there was an issue around porting them to PC. According to Japanese publication Nikkan Taishu, there was a reluctance to bring the games to the platform, resulting in worry from fans over any potential third game in the series.

However, both Yagami-led titles are now on Steam, suggesting the disagreement was ironed out – but what if things aren't all done and dusted? Just because the previous two games are now on PC, it doesn't mean Kimura's people are happy about it, so it may be ill-advised to expect a third Judgment game. The natural alternative, then, would be to find a new character for the brawler games, and instead of looking forward to a new face, why not put Shun Akiyama back in the spotlight? LAD's crafted a world full to the brim of compelling characters looking to scrap, so why stop there? We could even see the return of other previous protagonists like Masayoshi Tanimura, Tatsuo Shinada, or (dare I say it?) Goro Majima. Just imagine!

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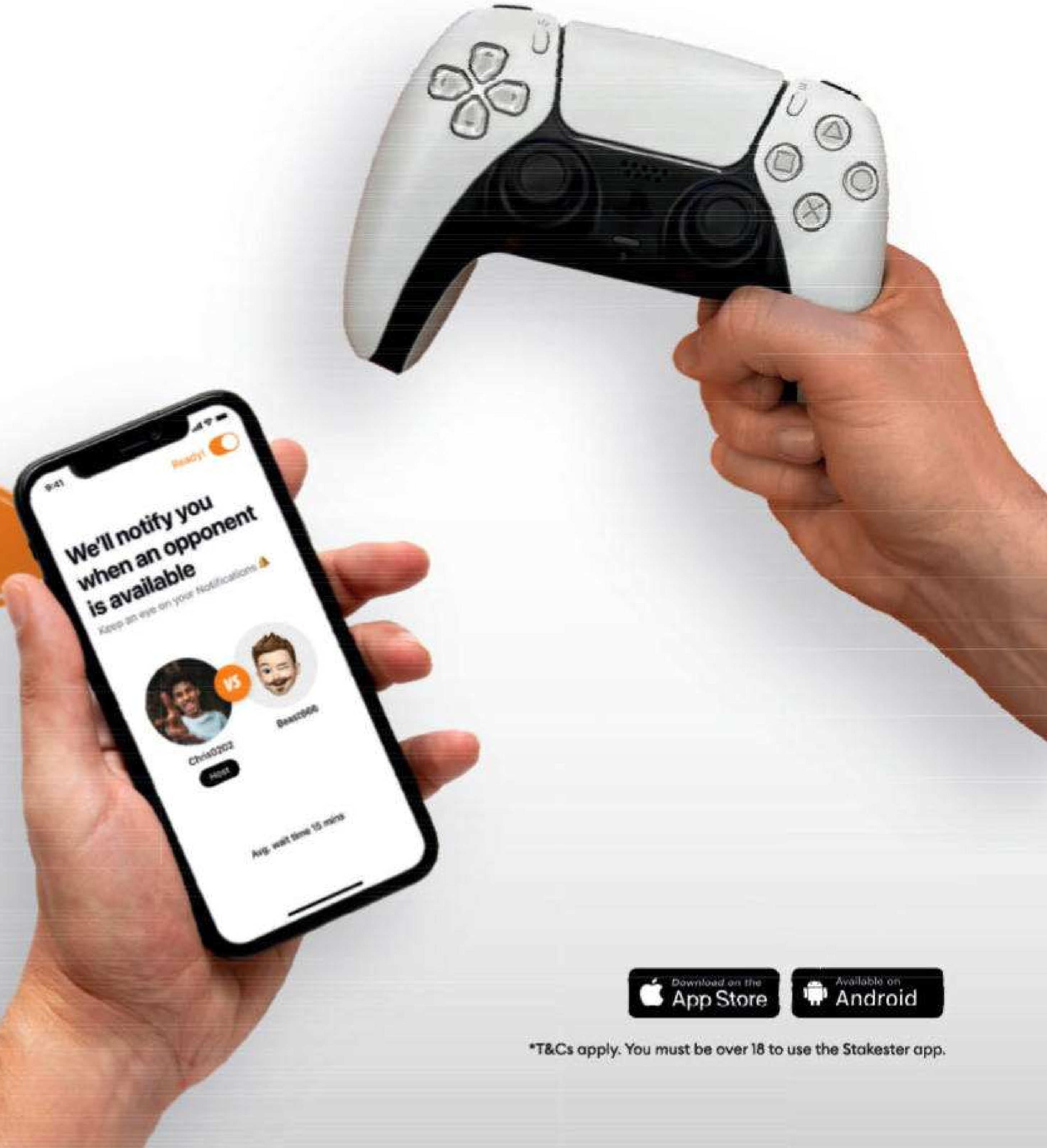
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Keep an eye on your Notifications
VS
Chris0202
Host
Beast666
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REPLIES

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#38 Celebrating the dawn of a new adventure in Final Fantasy XIV.

X-STATIC

I'm really excited to see Xbox games coming to PlayStation – it's not like PC hasn't had PlayStation games, so it's good to see Microsoft making stuff available to us for a change. It's a bit gutting that there are only four, though. I'd really like to be able to play something like Halo with my brother. Do you think we'll see more coming in future?
Jordan Maples

We'd be very surprised if we didn't – big companies seem to be increasingly leaning on live service and online games to make their money, and in those cases limiting their playerbase to users of just one console makes no sense. That said, PlayStation really excels at character action games and RPGs, and we'd love to see things like Indiana Jones And The Great Circle come to PS5 as it would really appeal to the console's core users.

ACTION!

Do you guys have a thing for JRPGs or something? It's all 'Final Fantasy this, Persona that'. Not everyone likes those games, you know.
Andy Carmichael

A lot of people (we admit we're among them) love those games. But, we cover all sorts. We're partial to a bit of character action too, and Oscar's visual novel collection is legendary.

PS… SIX?

What's all this nonsense about PS5 being in the later stages of its lifespan? Some of us struggled to get hold of one for the first year or so – I don't want to go through the same thing all over again with PS6!
Karen Hamble

PS5 launched late in 2020, so while Sony's said it's in the "latter stage of its lifespan" there are still years left in it. And even when it's replaced, we'd expect games to be released for it for years to come. Don't worry!

> "WHAT'S ALL THIS NONSENSE ABOUT PS5 BEING IN THE LATER STAGES OF ITS LIFESPAN?"

STAR LETTER DEEP CUTS

Since last year I've been reading news of cuts within the games industry and it's really making me sad. Some of the teams affected have made some of the greatest games ever – and now Sony's up to it too. How can there be a need to cut staff at Naughty Dog? That place made some of the best games of all time! I can't see how Insomniac needed cutting either. And losing London Studio completely is just awful. It's not like Sony went on a massive buying spree like some other companies, so getting rid of all those staff and studios doesn't make much sense to me. Do you think as a result of it all we'll see fewer good games coming to PS5 in future?
Carl Jenkins

We're optimistic about getting good games, though like you we're sorry to see so many good developers affected by layoffs across the entire industry. Sony had bought a few studios, though it hadn't been acquiring at the rate of some other companies. Our hope is that these talented people won't be lost to the industry altogether, but that they'll be able to establish new studios, and with the extra creative freedom both they as developers and we as players will benefit.

CAN I GET A RT?

The most pleasing tweetings from our timeline…

@DJ3writes
There's only a few magazines I still read regularly, but this is definitely one of them.

@playspine
Redline featured in @PLAYgamingmag's latest issue!

Game producer @DmiPim spills the beans on SPINE's backstory, development journey, and also shares exciting insights.

The 1st SPINE museum exhibit is officially on display! #playSPINE #PLAYMagazine

@SolipsismCrisis
I've literally thrown stuff in the bin that people would actually buy these days. Old C64 with disk drive and loads of games.

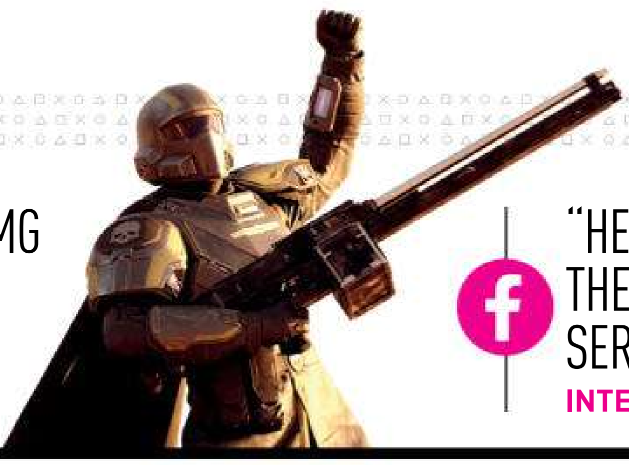
TROLL OF THE MONTH

@PSGen84
I don't know why support this trash game

@matt2004hoop
Always have a quick glance at the prices for used games in the latest @PLAYgamingmag. £343 for The Firemen!!! I had this boxed when I was younger but sold it for a pittance in my late teens

@Zyonight
Look at this gorgeous cover!

REPLIES



“LOOKS MORE AS A CHEAP PS1 GAME… OMG WEAPON DESIGNS LOOK CHEAP… GAME IS UTTER DOG *POO EMOJI*.”

SORRY, PETERS NATHAN, BUT YOU’RE WRONG

“HELLDIVERS PROVES THAT THE ONLY THING RUINING LIVE SERVICE GAMES IS GREED.”

INTERESTING, JORDAN BAKER…

READERS’ MOST WANTED

Which games are bleeping loudest on your radar?

01

Marvel’s Wolverine
He’s just so cool. We want to be him. *Now.*
FORMAT PS5
ETA TBA

02

Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine II
For the Emperor!
FORMAT PS5
ETA 2024

03

Elden Ring – Shadow Of The Erdtree
That’ll be us spending summer indoors, then…
FORMAT PS5
ETA 21 JUN

VOTE NOW!

Tell us the five games you can’t wait to play at play@futurenet.com

05

Thank Goodness You’re Here!
Well slap us silly; we didn’t expect this comedy game to make the list.
FORMAT PS5
ETA 2024

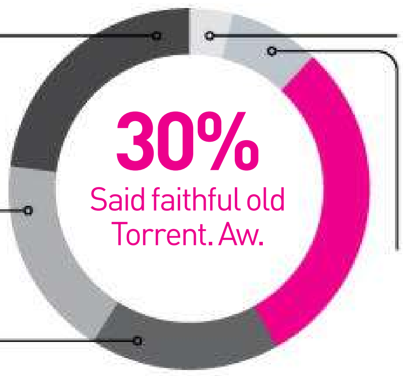
04

The Thaumaturge
Who doesn’t crave an extra-gloomy Polish nightmare, eh?
FORMAT PS5
ETA 2024

EXIT POLL

Our Facebook fans answer a final question

WHO’S YOUR FAVOURITE CHARACTER IN ELDEN RING?



30% Said faithful old Torrent. Aw.

23% Awoo for wolfman Blaidd.

18% Were pleased to see Patches again.

17% Chose Malenia. Masochists.

4% Named one of the Living Jars.

8% Think Miriel’s turtley great.

NEXT MONTH

Who’s your favourite comic-book villain on PlayStation?

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Previews

"SUPER-SLICK COMBAT."

040 Zenless Zone Zero

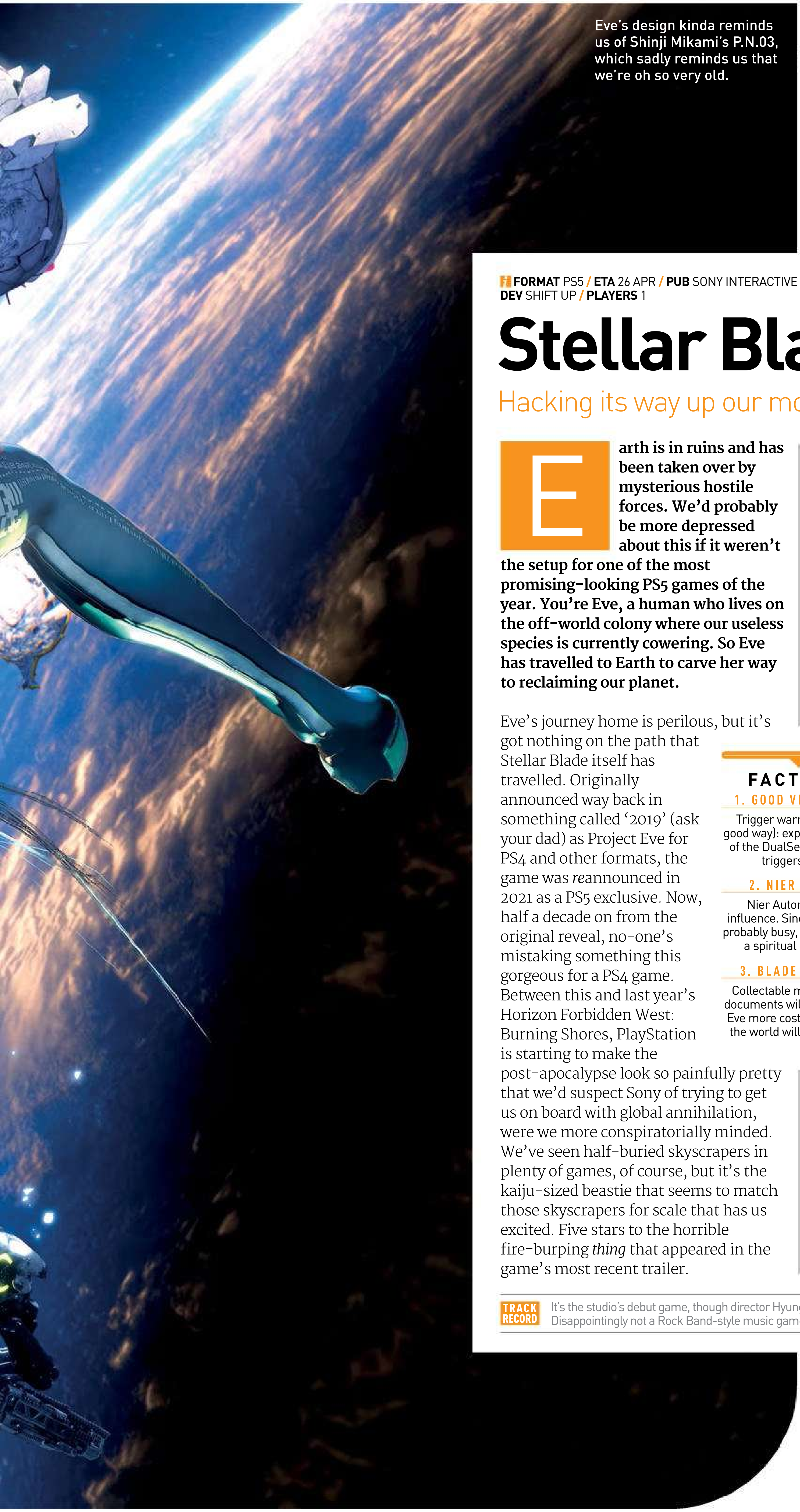
028 Stellar Blade

Inventive, massive monsters ahead!

HIGHLIGHTS

STELLAR BLADE 028 | TIMES & GALAXY 032 | UNTIL THEN 034
MORBID: THE LORDS OF IRE 038 | ZENLESS ZONE ZERO 040
SAND LAND 044 | RISE OF THE RONIN 046

"THE KAIJU-SIZED BEASTIE THAT MATCHES THE SKYSCRAPERS FOR SCALE HAS US EXCITED."



Eve's design kinda reminds us of Shinji Mikami's P.N.03, which sadly reminds us that we're oh so very old.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 26 APR / **PUB** SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
DEV SHIFT UP / **PLAYERS** 1

Stellar Blade

Hacking its way up our most wanted list

Earth is in ruins and has been taken over by mysterious hostile forces. We'd probably be more depressed about this if it weren't the setup for one of the most promising-looking PS5 games of the year. You're Eve, a human who lives on the off-world colony where our useless species is currently cowering. So Eve has travelled to Earth to carve her way to reclaiming our planet.

Eve's journey home is perilous, but it's got nothing on the path that Stellar Blade itself has travelled. Originally announced way back in something called '2019' (ask your dad) as Project Eve for PS4 and other formats, the game was *re*announced in 2021 as a PS5 exclusive. Now, half a decade on from the original reveal, no-one's mistaking something this gorgeous for a PS4 game. Between this and last year's Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores, PlayStation is starting to make the post-apocalypse look so painfully pretty that we'd suspect Sony of trying to get us on board with global annihilation, were we more conspiratorially minded. We've seen half-buried skyscrapers in plenty of games, of course, but it's the kaiju-sized beastie that seems to match those skyscrapers for scale that has us excited. Five stars to the horrible fire-burping *thing* that appeared in the game's most recent trailer.

FACTRICK

1. GOOD VIBRATIONS

Trigger warning (er, in a good way): expect strong use of the DualSense' adaptive triggers. Nice!

2. NIER ENOUGH

Nier Automata is an influence. Since Yoko Toro's probably busy, we'll settle for a spiritual successor.

3. BLADE STUNNER

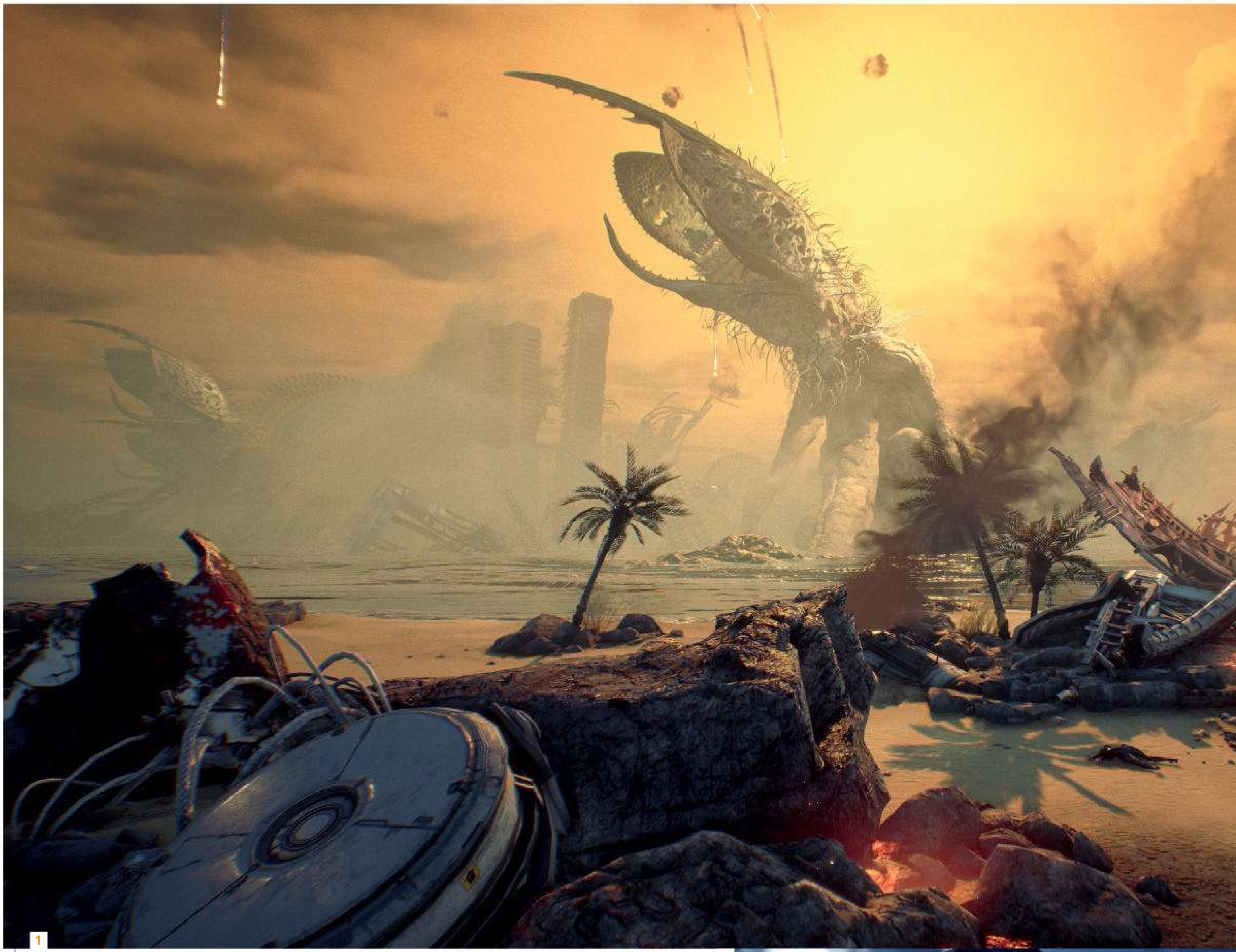
Collectable materials and documents will let you make Eve more costumes. Saving the world will have to wait.

Eve will eventually travel to Xion, the last human city on Earth, where the survivors call her 'angel'. We'd assume most people who call you 'angel' would like you, but Eve's actually apparently a subject of both 'awe and fear'. You'll have to win over the suspicious city folk, including a surly shopkeeper who we bet is holding back some tasty upgrades. Survivors will dish out side-quests, like a mission to find someone's younger sister (yawn) or to track down a missing cat (OMG priority one). Luckily not everyone you meet is angel-phobic. You'll have an ally in the wonderfully pompously named Lily Artemis The Second. She provides engineering support, and has already engineered herself a permanent spot in our hearts by making a much-needed double jump for Eve.

CTRL-ALT-DEFEAT

You'll explore The Wasteland, also known as The Great Desert, also known as PLAY Magazine Sure Hopes Most of The Game Isn't Set In A Frikkin' Desert. The desert's full of malfunctioning robots and the mysterious Naytiba (Neigh-Tea-Bah), the hostile creatures who rudely took over the planet. Between bouts, Eve comes across friendlier humans and robots – and what look like messy cyborg mixes of both – who need her help, and it'll be up to you whether you offer your assistance or opt to ignore them because they're cutting into your hacking and slashing.

TRACK RECORD It's the studio's debut game, though director Hyung-Tae Kim did direct Destiny Child for mobile. Disappointingly not a Rock Band-style music game about Beyonce's OG band, but a *very* anime gacha game.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We're going to be tempted to opt for the latter path, because the bestiary we've seen so far looks fantastic fun to fight. A lion-like creature with a hand for a face! An even bigger monster with a *tyre* for a face! A yellow and orange horrorshow that looks like it has to be parried Sekiro-style! Tentacles on absolutely everything! We're big fans of monsters that look like grim and gooey hybrids of cosmic-horror nightmares and junkyard debris. Developer Shift Up certainly hasn't shied away from spraying about the red stuff when your blows land either. If Stellar Blade has the combat chops, this could be PS5's Bayonetta, or at the very least a nice apology for Atlas Fallen.

BAYO-NIER-TA?

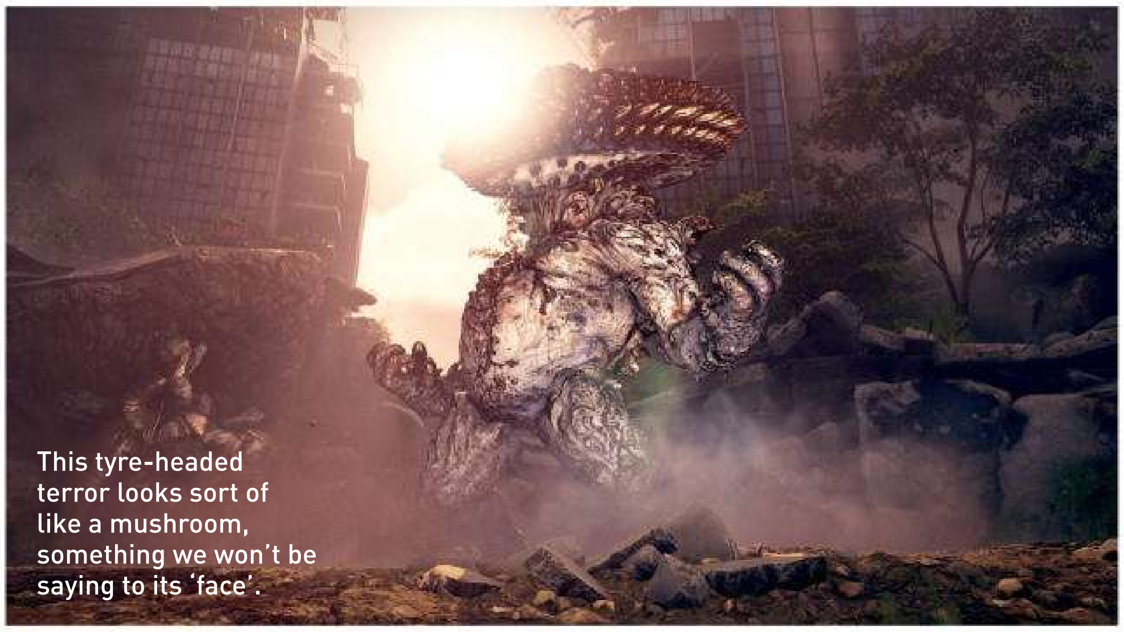
Fortunately, combat looks like it'll have depth. Fighting comes in four distinct flavours (basic, beta, ranged, and burst) and we spy a promisingly large skill tree. The game's director has cited God Of War as a favourite, and also claimed inspiration from Bayonetta, Jedi: Fallen Order, and Sekiro – great games all. What combat demands from you will also evolve throughout the campaign. In early encounters you'll rely upon using combos to down foes. Parrying and dodging will gradually become more important, as the game presumably goes through its moody Dark Soulsy teenage years. Then the latter half promises "organic interactions where the player fights using skills and energy acquired thus far." Intriguing! We can't wait to see what moves are sprouting on the tips of Eve's skill tree…

If we had a subscriber for every time we heard the ridiculous phrase 'single-player is dead' then we'd have sold enough issues to destroy the world's rainforests, and poor Eve would probably have to fight malicious sentient seeds in order to replant them. But combat-focussed single-player gaming seems to be enjoying a mini-renaissance right now. While Eve's dress sense is so eye-rollingly revealing that she might as well have just donned a fig leaf, and the constant Biblical references are about as subtle as the actual Bible, all other signs point towards this being a superb PS5 slice-'em-up.

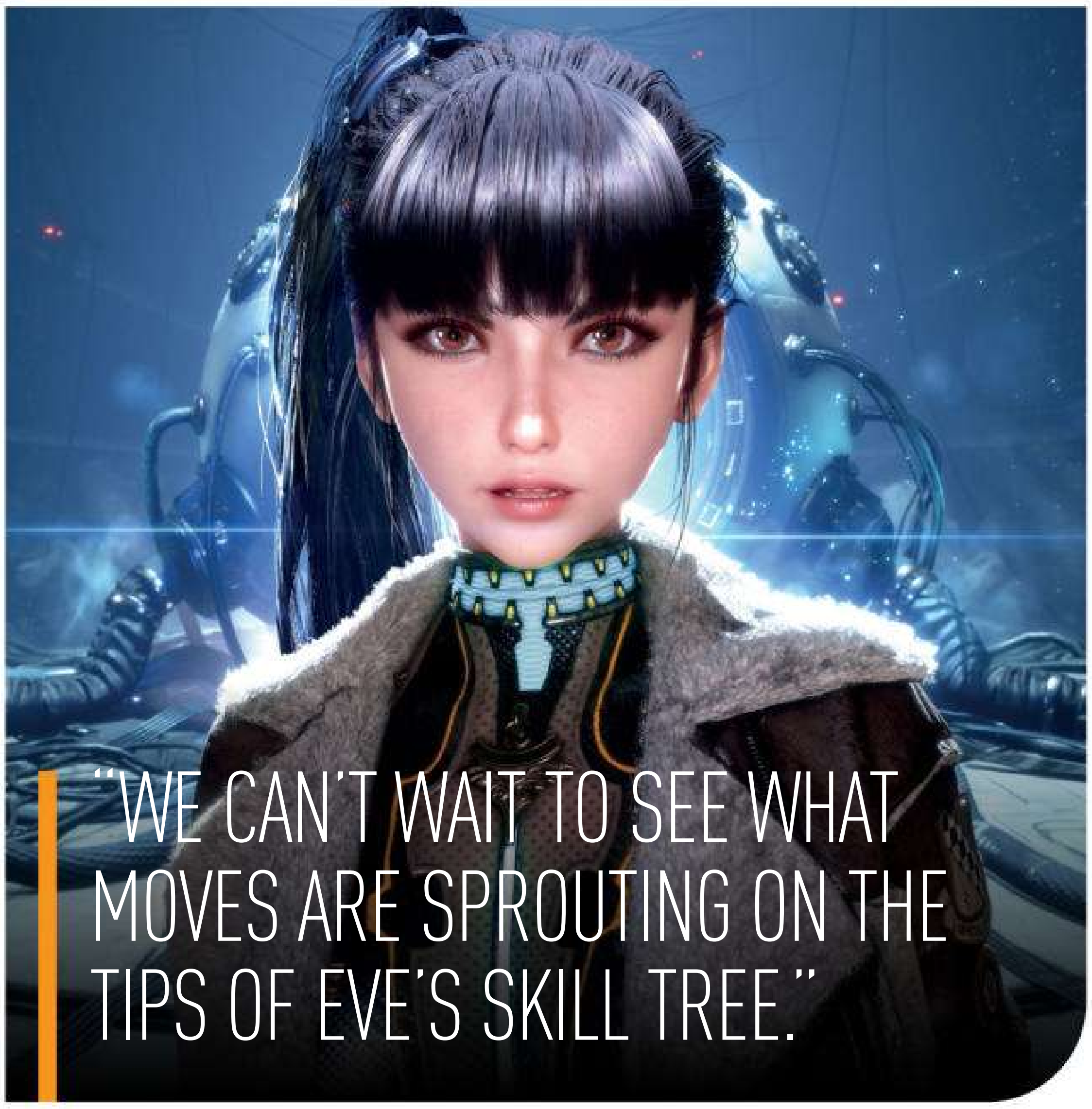
IMPRESSIONS

We can't wait to find out how the combat feels in the hands, but this looks more promising every time we see it. Just like its monsters, hopefully this is a lethal hybrid of some true combat classics.

1 Look at this massive monster! And there are *at least* two of these worm-things. BRING IT. 2 One of your allies is called Adam, because of course he bloody is. 3 Drink every time the game reminds you of Nier Automata, and you'll end up with a liver worthy of Yoko Taro. 4 This looks like it's been rejected by Sekiro, Bloodborne, *and* Doom. Yikes.



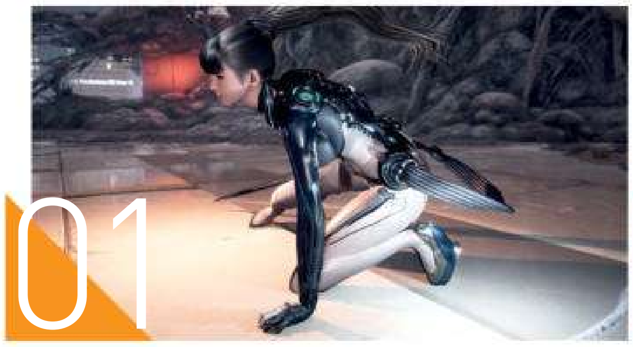
This tyre-headed terror looks sort of like a mushroom, something we won't be saying to its 'face'.



> "WE CAN'T WAIT TO SEE WHAT MOVES ARE SPROUTING ON THE TIPS OF EVE'S SKILL TREE."

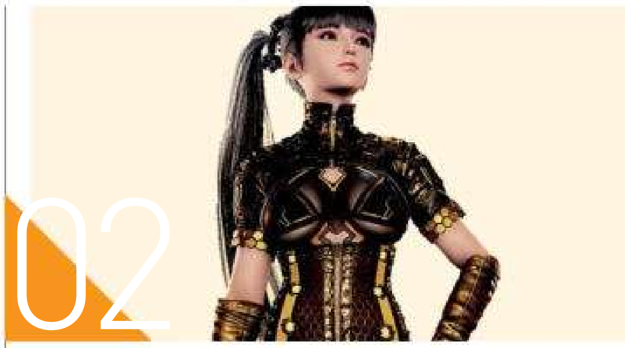
Costume drama

What to wear when saving the world?



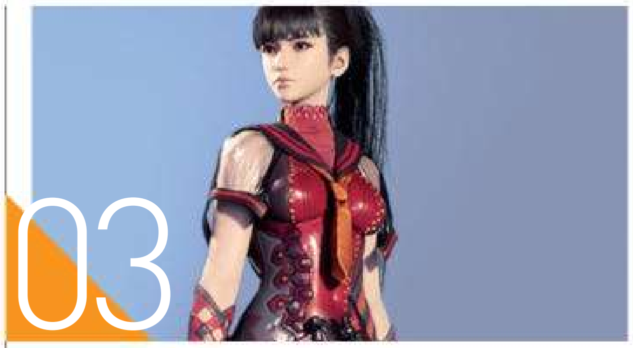
01

Eve will have "about 20 to 30 costumes" to collect. But we reckon so far we've seen about enough material between them to make *one* costume.



02

This Stargazer suit is exclusive to the deluxe edition. Hey, if Eve's game doesn't work out, she can always find work at Final Fantasy VII's Honeybee Inn.



03

Pre-ordering gets you this red-and-black Planet Diving suit, plus glasses. (We hope Eve isn't going to be shortsighted without them if we *don't* pre-order.)

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** FELLOW TRAVELLER / **DEV** COPYCHASER GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Times & Galaxy

This little robo reporter has a big scoop

Before you've even set foot inside the prestigious Times & Galaxy newsroom, you're whisked away to the location of your very first assignment. There's no time to waste in Copychaser Games' upbeat sci-fi game. You're cast as the solar system's very first robo reporter, and given you're also currently just the (unpaid) rookie intern, you've got a lot to prove.

Detective game fans will feel right at home playing this, as working a story as a reporter isn't dissimilar to working a case as a gumshoe in other games. When you arrive at the site of your next scoop, you need to interview witnesses, survey the scene, and search for clues. While not every assignment will be exciting, like uncovering why a police pursuit escalated into a terrible crash, even something as tedious as The Humania Intersolar Cat Show might be hiding a juicy drama behind the pampered pets and satin rosettes. Each scenario tasks you with finding the heart of the story, and a good reporter will always be able to sniff out an interesting angle.

However, getting that delicious scoop requires some finesse. You can only ask a limited number of questions of each interviewee, so you have to choose them wisely, prioritising what you think would be the most helpful to your story. There are no real right or wrong questions, and if you want to take a risk and pick a wild question you'll be rewarded with interesting responses such as a spicy quote that'll punch your story up. Some of your choices can also really rub folk up the wrong way, like asking how a pile of bright pink goop can be entered into a cat competition. Here's a tip: never question the love between an alien and their adorable 'cat'.

Once you've chatted with everyone and checked out the scene, it's time to decide on your story. This happens in the 'build-a-story' menu where you can construct an article from the information you've gathered. There are different parts of the article to decide on, starting with a catchy headline, a gripping lede to pull readers in, a nut graf to keep 'em engaged, and then sealing the deal with an interesting quote and extra detail. You'll be locked out of some options because you didn't ask the appropriate questions or follow certain story paths, but that's all part of being a reporter. Work out your angle, choose the appropriate options, and fire it off to your editor. It's all incredibly streamlined, with plenty of different angles and options to explore. It's fun and satisfying to be able to create the story you envision. Never once do we have an angle in mind while investigating that then isn't available to pursue in the story-building tool.

BREAKING NEWS

Another fun element to building stories is that by choosing different options, your write-up will be read in a certain way. If you want to create a spicy article with drama and gossip, then it will come across as sensationalist. Write an educational and detailed piece and it'll be read as informative, if a bit bland. If you're someone who likes to focus on the people and characters you meet (the who rather than the why), then your writing will garner more of an alien audience over a human one. Depending on the angles you tend to favour, you'll start to gain a certain readership and reputation that will impact how you're perceived by beings you meet on assignments and your fellow Times & Galaxy colleagues.

In between outings, you'll be hanging out on the Times & Galaxy ship, meeting fellow writers on the holopaper plus a colourful bunch of crewmates who hail from all over the galaxy. Copychaser Games has created a futuristic world bursting with personality and adventure, and although you're a reporter robot manufactured for one specific purpose, with all the choices the game has everyone's reporter 'bot will be different. You get to decide what kind of reporter you'd like to be – and eventually get on that payroll too!

> "DECIDE WHAT KIND OF REPORTER YOU'D LIKE TO BE – AND EVENTUALLY GET ON THE PAYROLL."

IMPRESSIONS

Detective work and newspaper reporting go hand in hand, making for a fun, upbeat journo adventure that's the first of its kind. We're excited to dive back in when Times & Galaxy releases later this year.

FACTRICK

1. RECHARGE

During your outings, you'll often find strange seeds, which you can sow in the ship's on-board garden.

2. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

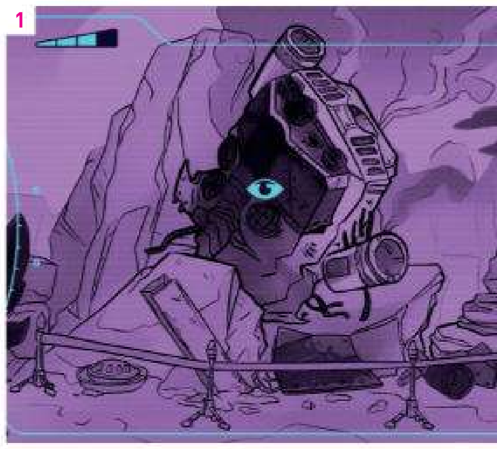
Personalise your reporter with pronoun options and chassis colours, and choose from a selection of bodies.

3. FILED EXPERIENCE

Team members at Copychaser Games worked as journalists before joining in the games industry.

TRACK RECORD This is the second game to be made by Copychaser Games. The studio's debut, wholesome horror dating sim Speed Dating For Ghosts, never came to PlayStation. Its third game, Slumber Clause, is currently in development.

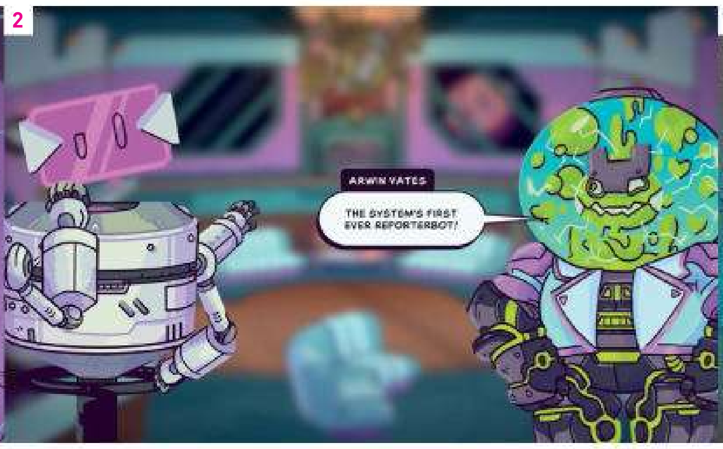
1



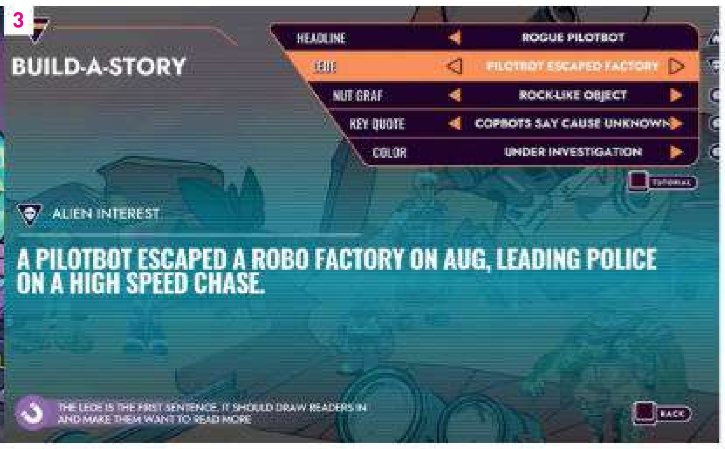
4

4 Sometimes you'll not only have to choose your questions wisely but also who you talk to, as characters don't always hang around and can leave the scene.
5 Flirt with characters to get more intimate responses. What's journalistic integrity?
6 Yes, you can pet the magenta slime cat.

2


ARWIN YATES
THE SYSTEM'S FIRST EVER REPORTERBOT!

3


BUILD-A-STORY

HEADLINE	ROGUE PILOTBOT
LEDE	PILOTBOT ESCAPED FACTORY
NUT GRAF	ROCK-LIKE OBJECT
KEY QUOTE	COPBOTS SAY CAUSE UNKNOWN
COLOR	UNDER INVESTIGATION

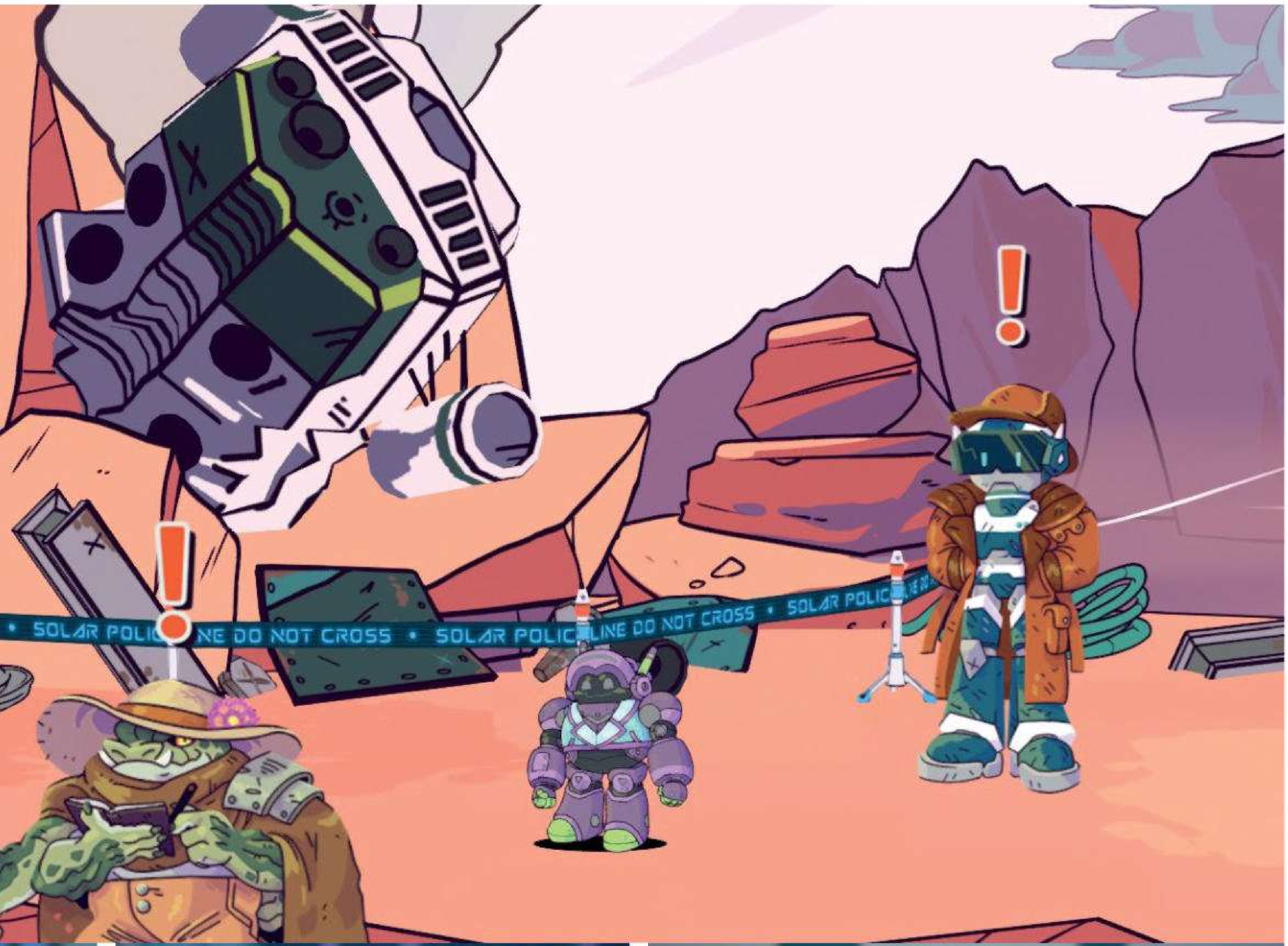
ALIEN INTEREST

A PILOTBOT ESCAPED A ROBO FACTORY ON AUG, LEADING POLICE ON A HIGH SPEED CHASE.

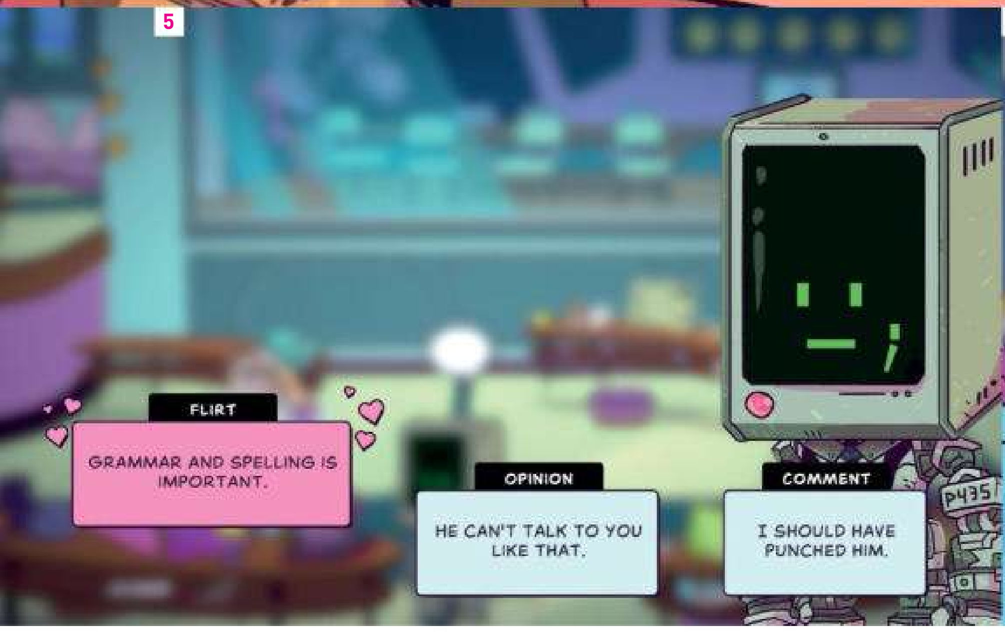
THE LEDE IS THE FIRST SENTENCE. IT SHOULD DRAW READERS IN AND MAKE THEM WANT TO READ MORE

TUTORIAL
BACK

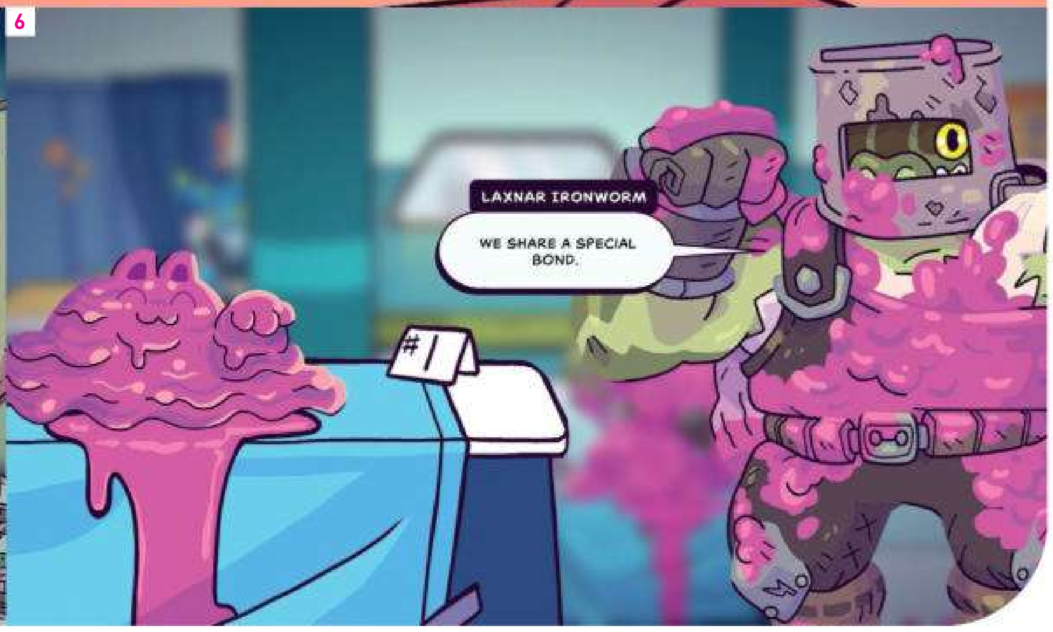
1 Your built-in scanner will pick out important details in each scene. **2** You'll meet other robots on your travels, mostly working as labourers of some sort. Maybe a reporter with influence could change that... **3** The build-a-story screen is packed with information but is easy to get to grips with.


SOLAR POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

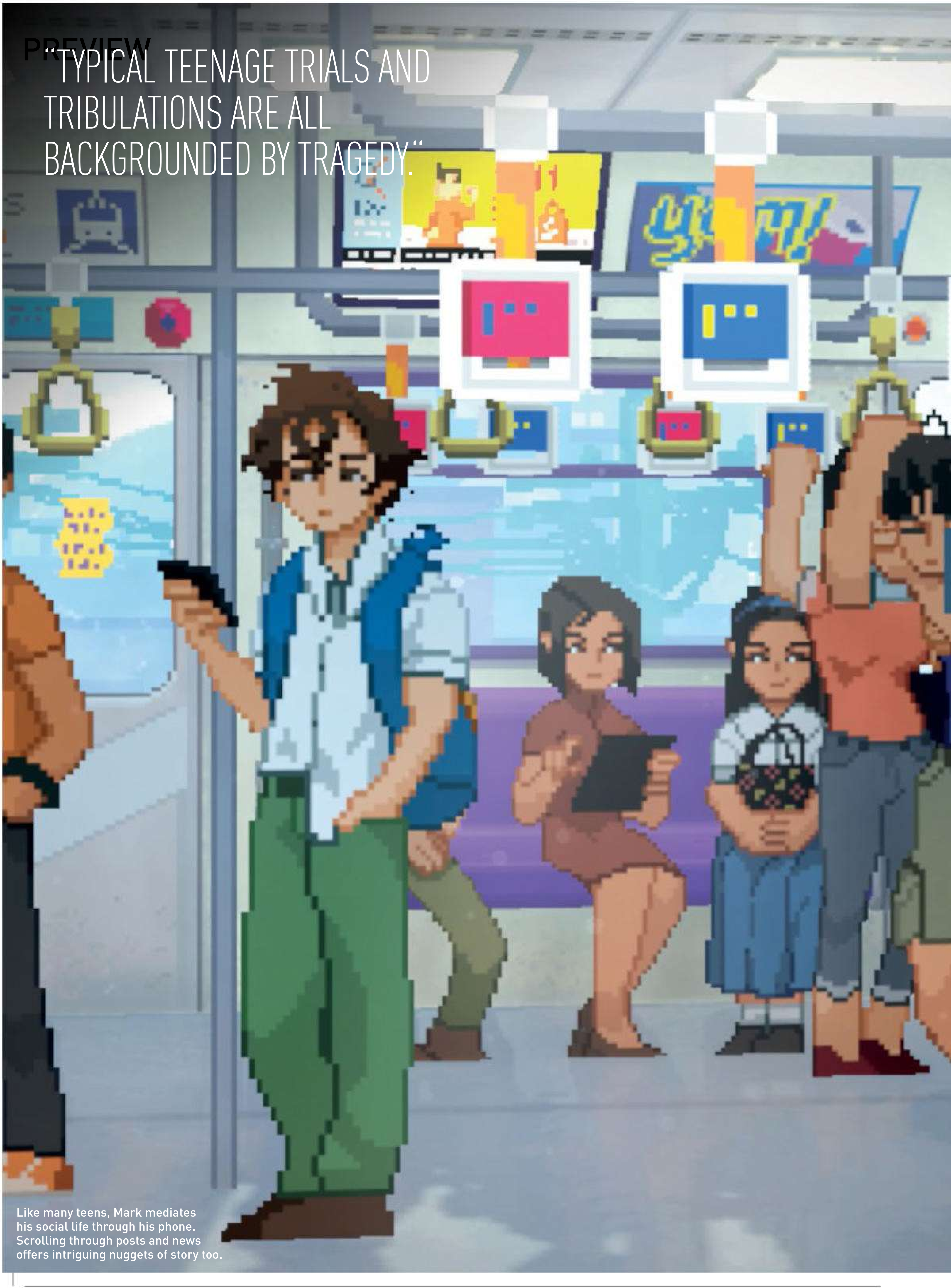
5


FLIRT
GRAMMAR AND SPELLING IS IMPORTANT.
OPINION
HE CAN'T TALK TO YOU LIKE THAT.
COMMENT
I SHOULD HAVE PUNCHED HIM.
P435

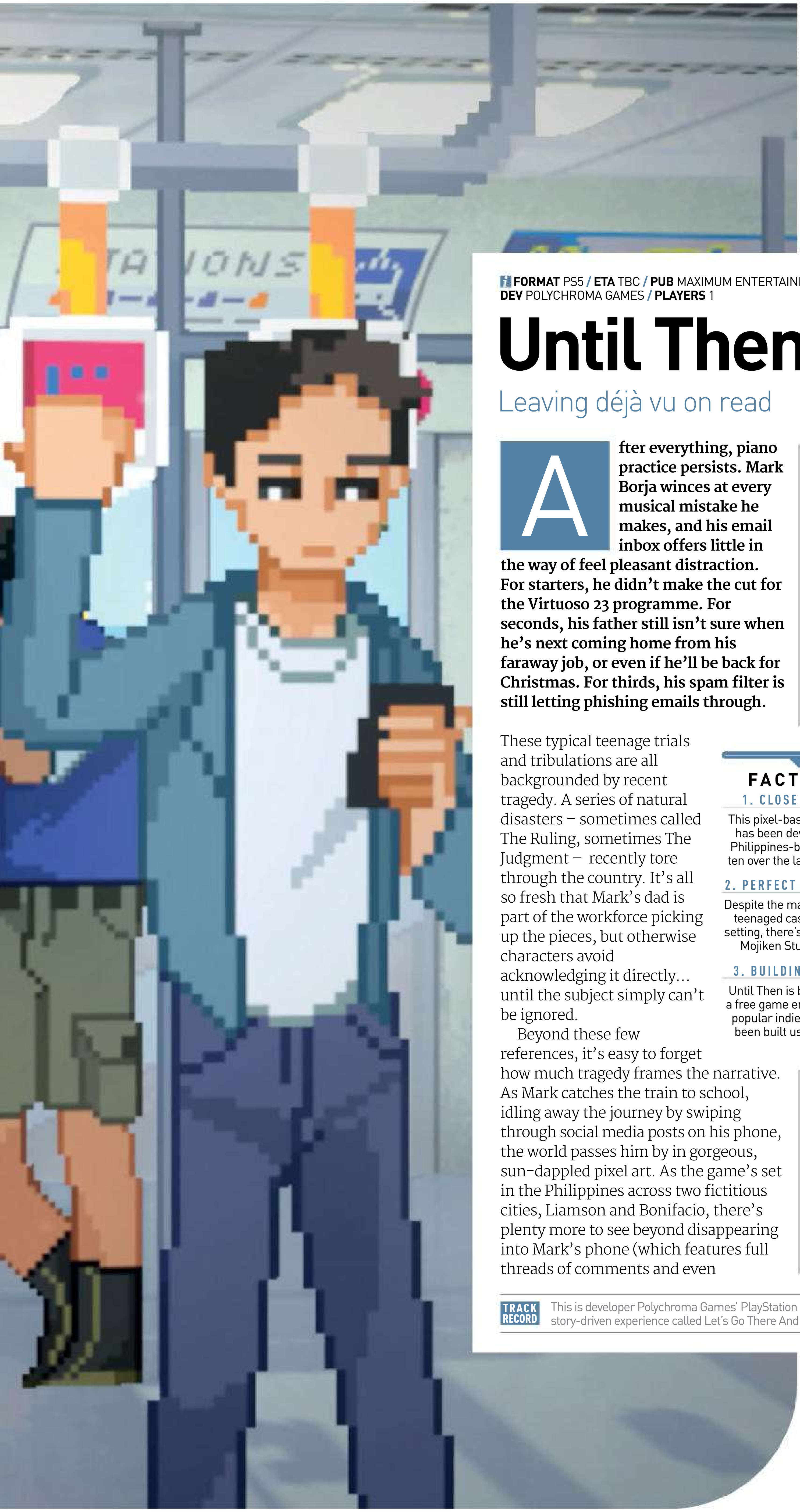
6


LAXNAR IRONWORM
WE SHARE A SPECIAL BOND.
#1

“TYPICAL TEENAGE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS ARE ALL BACKGROUNDED BY TRAGEDY.”



Like many teens, Mark mediates his social life through his phone. Scrolling through posts and news offers intriguing nuggets of story too.



FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** MAXIMUM ENTERTAINMENT
DEV POLYCHROMA GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Until Then

Leaving déjà vu on read

After everything, piano practice persists. Mark Borja winces at every musical mistake he makes, and his email inbox offers little in the way of feel pleasant distraction. For starters, he didn't make the cut for the Virtuoso 23 programme. For seconds, his father still isn't sure when he's next coming home from his faraway job, or even if he'll be back for Christmas. For thirds, his spam filter is still letting phishing emails through.

These typical teenage trials and tribulations are all backgrounded by recent tragedy. A series of natural disasters – sometimes called The Ruling, sometimes The Judgment – recently tore through the country. It's all so fresh that Mark's dad is part of the workforce picking up the pieces, but otherwise characters avoid acknowledging it directly… until the subject simply can't be ignored.

Beyond these few references, it's easy to forget how much tragedy frames the narrative. As Mark catches the train to school, idling away the journey by swiping through social media posts on his phone, the world passes him by in gorgeous, sun-dappled pixel art. As the game's set in the Philippines across two fictitious cities, Liamson and Bonifacio, there's plenty more to see beyond disappearing into Mark's phone (which features full threads of comments and even webpages for local news stories that you can like and share). Venturing from screen to screen, scene to scene, Mark's adventure is punctuated by minigames aplenty, from competitively bobbing for delicious fish balls to fairground shooting galleries, and much more besides. Along the way you'll meet Mark's teenaged pals, all brought to life through smart, believable writing and expressive, limited frame animation. But fresh disaster looms just over the horizon…

FACTRICK

1. CLOSE TO HOME

This pixel-based adventure has been developed by a Philippines-based team of ten over the last four years.

2. PERFECT STRANGERS

Despite the magical realism, teenaged cast, and Asian setting, there's no relation to Mojiken Studio's work.

3. BUILDING DREAMS

Until Then is built in Godot, a free game engine. Several popular indie games have been built using the tool.

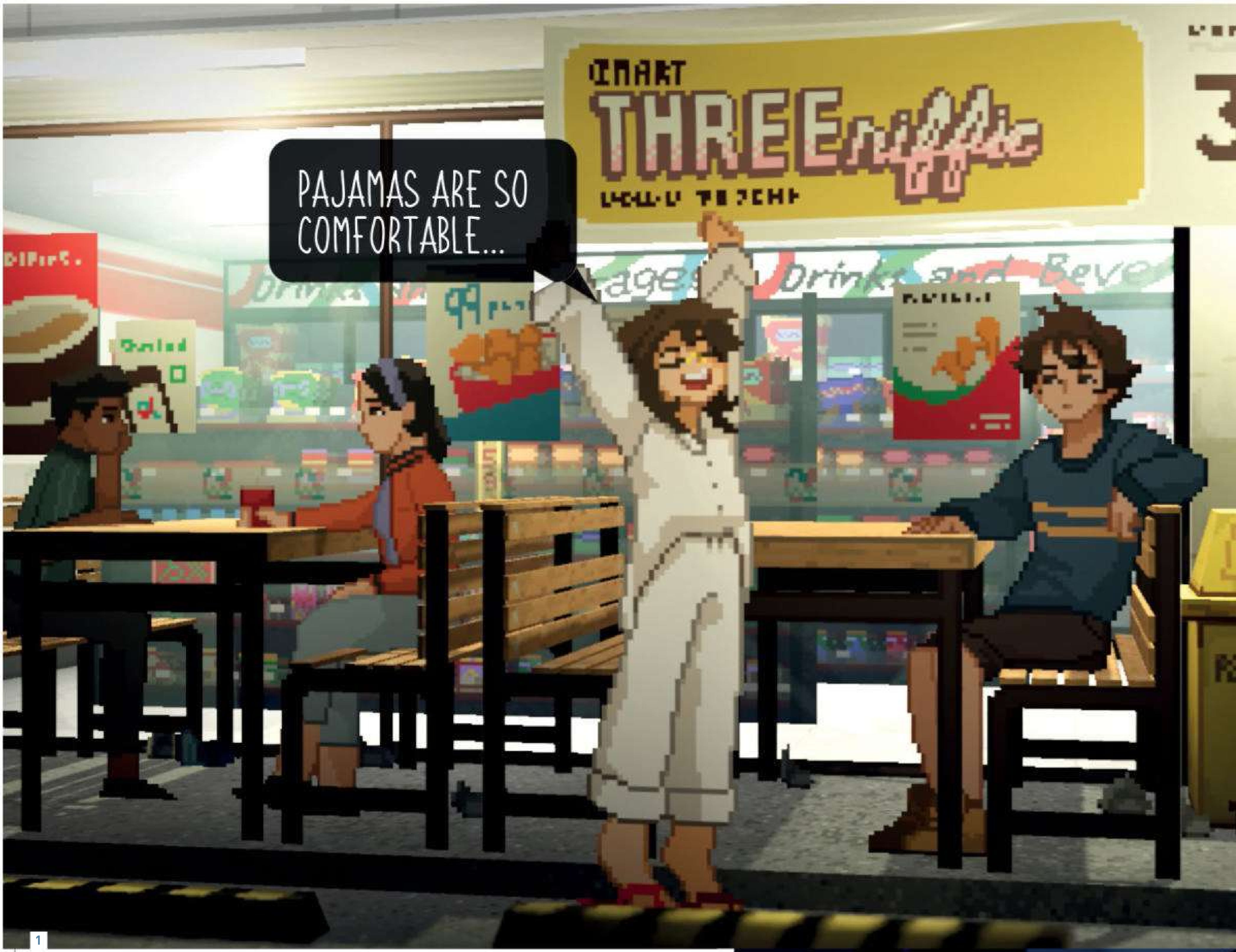
NEVER SEE IT COMING

After texting with ace student Louise, Mark realises he completely forgot about putting together the slides for their group project, due that morning. Teaming up with basketball obsessive Ryan, the pair put their heads together to come up with something in the ten minutes they have before class. Through dialogue options in our hands-on, it's up to us to help these two lads – who definitely did not do *all* the required reading – to make their presentation at least vaguely coherent. The pair are almost rumbled by group project manager Louise, but Mark is able to turn their conversation to videogames, finding unlikely common ground when it turns out all three of them are obsessed with Darkfiends 3.

Anyway, it's showtime and there's nothing left to do but see if the gang will pass or fail. As the teacher rambles on about his cat, Mark's mind wanders through the whispered rumours of the classroom. Apparently Louise

»

TRACK RECORD This is developer Polychroma Games' PlayStation debut. The studio's very first game, a short and surreal story-driven experience called Let's Go There And Wander Nowhere, is available via Itch.io on PC.



1

rejected the attentions of *three* popular upperclassmen recently – does that mean Mark is still in with a chance? She catches him staring, and we're given the choice between two flustered dialogue options to redirect her attention. In a classic manoeuvre, Mark steers the conversation onto to the weather, though Louise's reply that she's glad the rain has stopped gives him pause. The thing is, it hasn't rained in Liamson at all that month. Usually-sharp Louise is shocked to hear this, and we soon learn there's more to her confusion than simply letting the world disappear as she studies.

FORGET ME NOT

Subtle hints of magical realism are sprinkled throughout Until Then's opening hours. In a quiet moment some time after the class presentation, Mark shows Louise the dry weather forecast for the past month. Louise says she saw it was raining outside her room just last week, though admits now that can't be possible. The dialogue options we have are charitable, suggesting either Louise dreamt it or maybe there really was an extremely localised rain shower right outside her window. Ah, the ways we're willing to 'yes, and' a crush!

But something even more mysterious is going on to even more people; as Louise asks Mark if he's ever felt an overwhelming sense of déjà vu, the music veers off key and the the screen shifts through a spectrum of chromatic aberration – and we soon discover she's not the only one who's been having troubling lapses in memory.

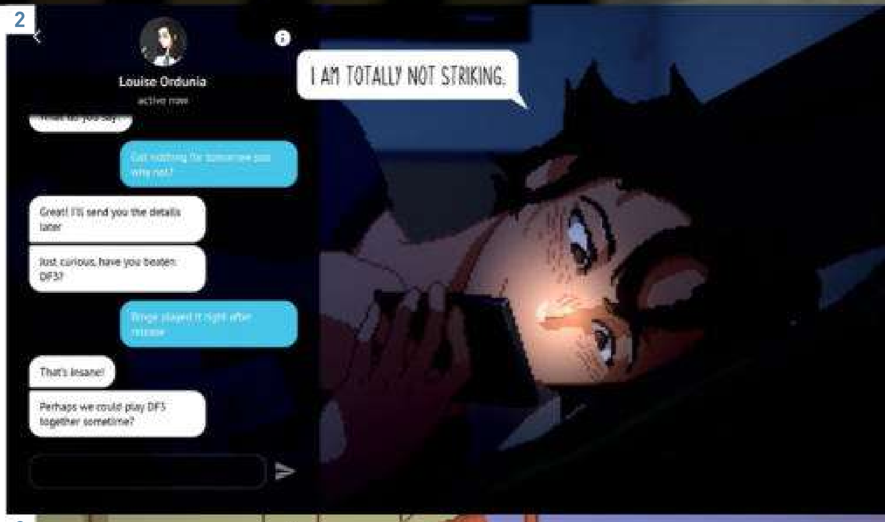
Later that night, Mark meets up with one of his besties, Cathy. The pair have a lot in common, from sharing charming inside jokes that'd take a fair few paragraphs to explain to both making heart eyes over Louise. Cathy is a fiend for gossip, getting the scoop on some fresh faces who will soon be joining their school. At least one of the students apparently has no online presence and evades all Cathy's attempts at stalking. However, the other girl's pictures hit Mark with a wave of déjà vu, as though he's known this perfect stranger for a long time.

And then, finally, it begins to rain…

IMPRESSIONS

Until Then impresses with its character writing and gorgeous visuals. Teasing a story involving false memories and plenty of mystery, we can't wait to see how it reveals its hand.

2


Louise Ordunia
active now

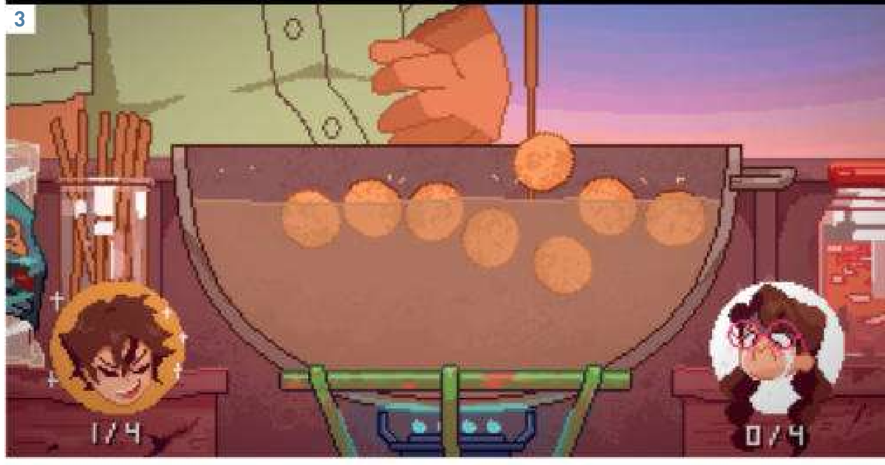
Great! I'll send you the details later

Just curious, have you beaten DF3?

That's insane!

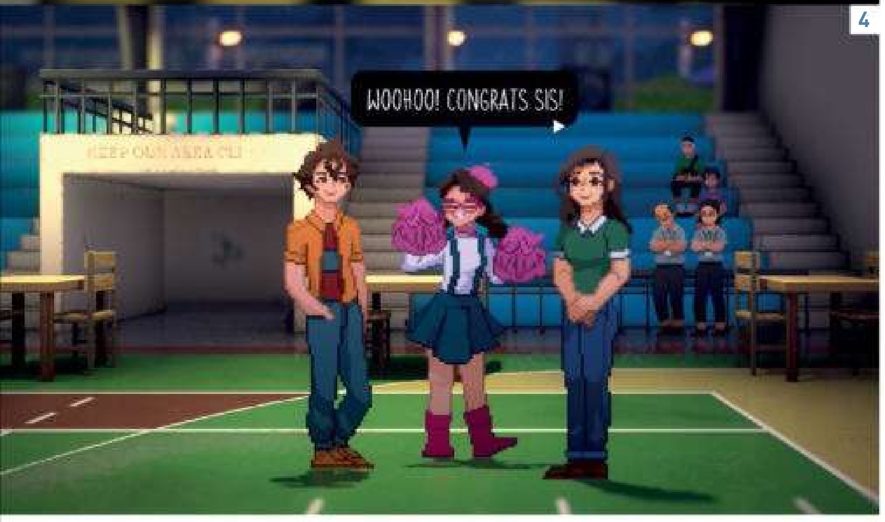
Perhaps we could play DF3 together sometime?

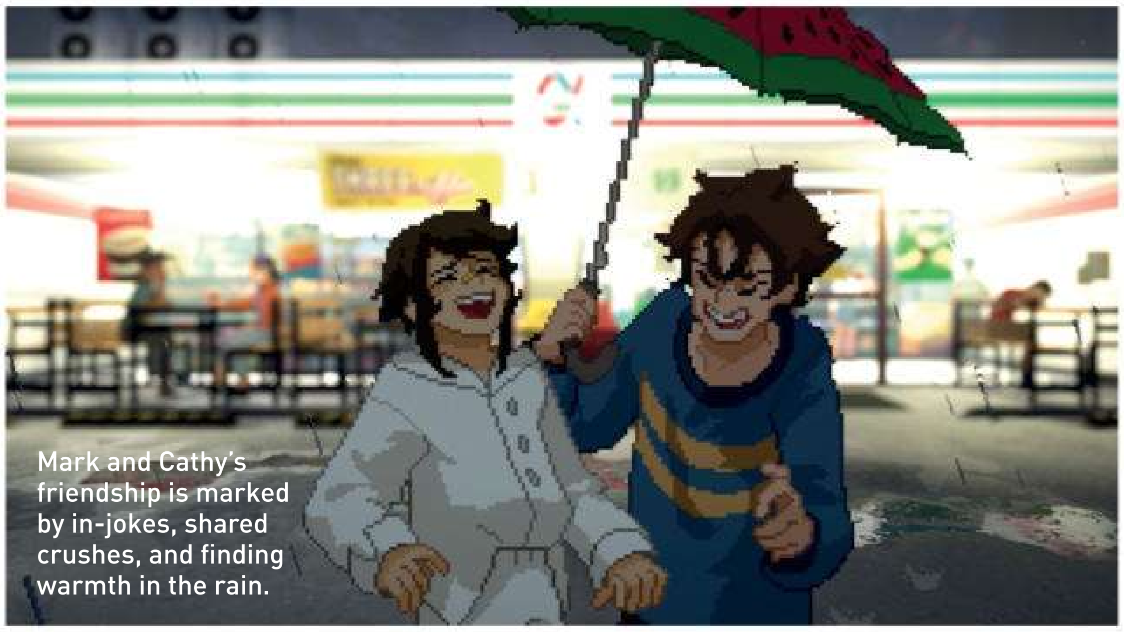
3

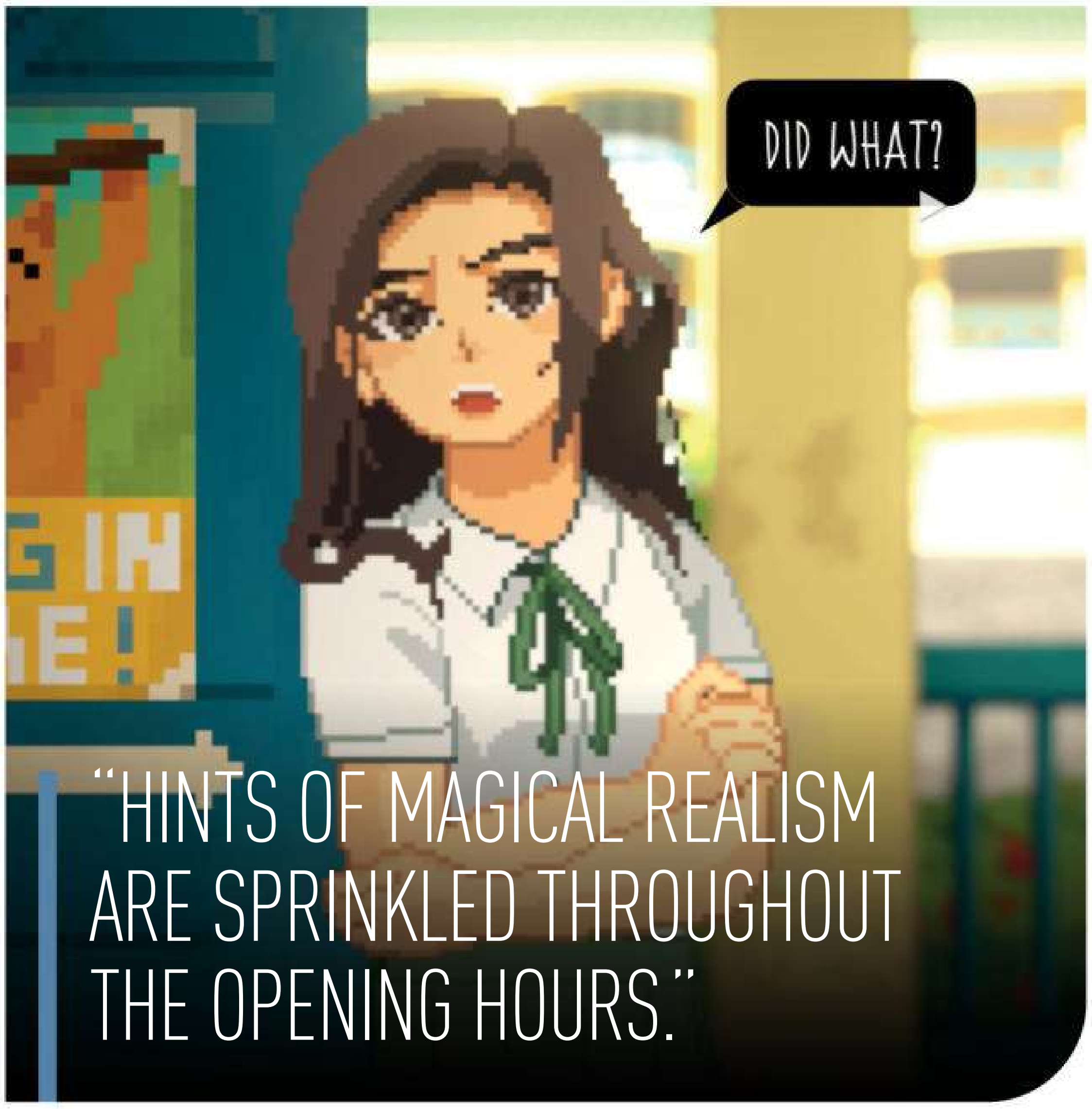


1 Wearing pyjamas to the shops? ...Well, if the weather permits! Sorry, we're with Cathy on this one. **2** Between group chats and playing it cool with crushes, the teen cast feels well-observed throughout. **3** Minigames such as bobbing for tasty fish balls bring even the most mundane moments to life – and now we're hungry. **4** The expressive, though limited, pixel animation immediately endears us to Until Then's cast.

4


WOOHOO! CONGRATS SIS!

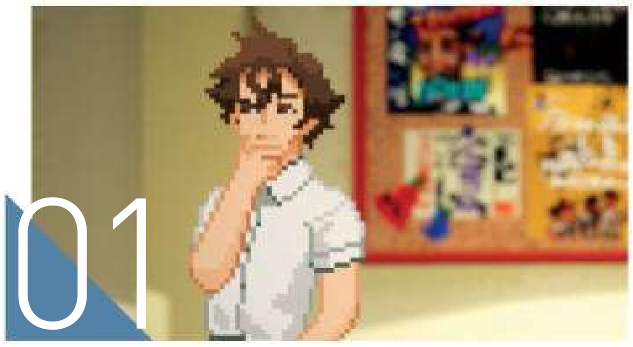

Mark and Cathy's friendship is marked by in-jokes, shared crushes, and finding warmth in the rain.



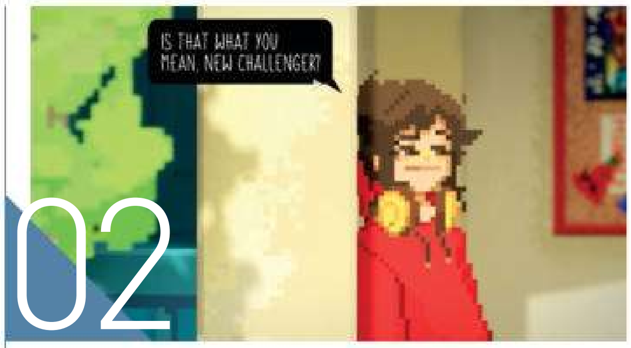
> "HINTS OF MAGICAL REALISM ARE SPRINKLED THROUGHOUT THE OPENING HOURS."

Dropping into the group chat

Who's who in the 'MCR' group chat (No, not *that* MCR)

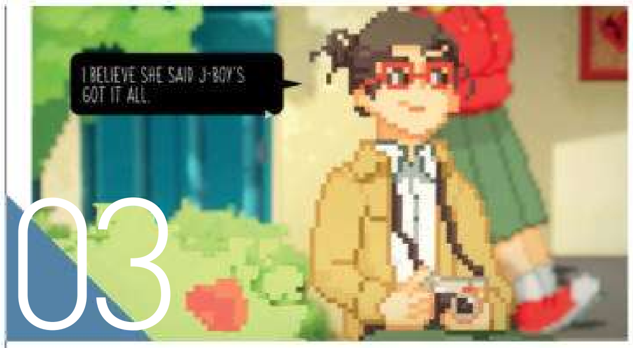

01

Our protagonist Mark is shown to be brilliant, but a bit of a slacker, wasting his natural abilities. Only his besties appear to see his true potential.


IS THAT WHAT YOU MEAN, NEW CHALLENGER?

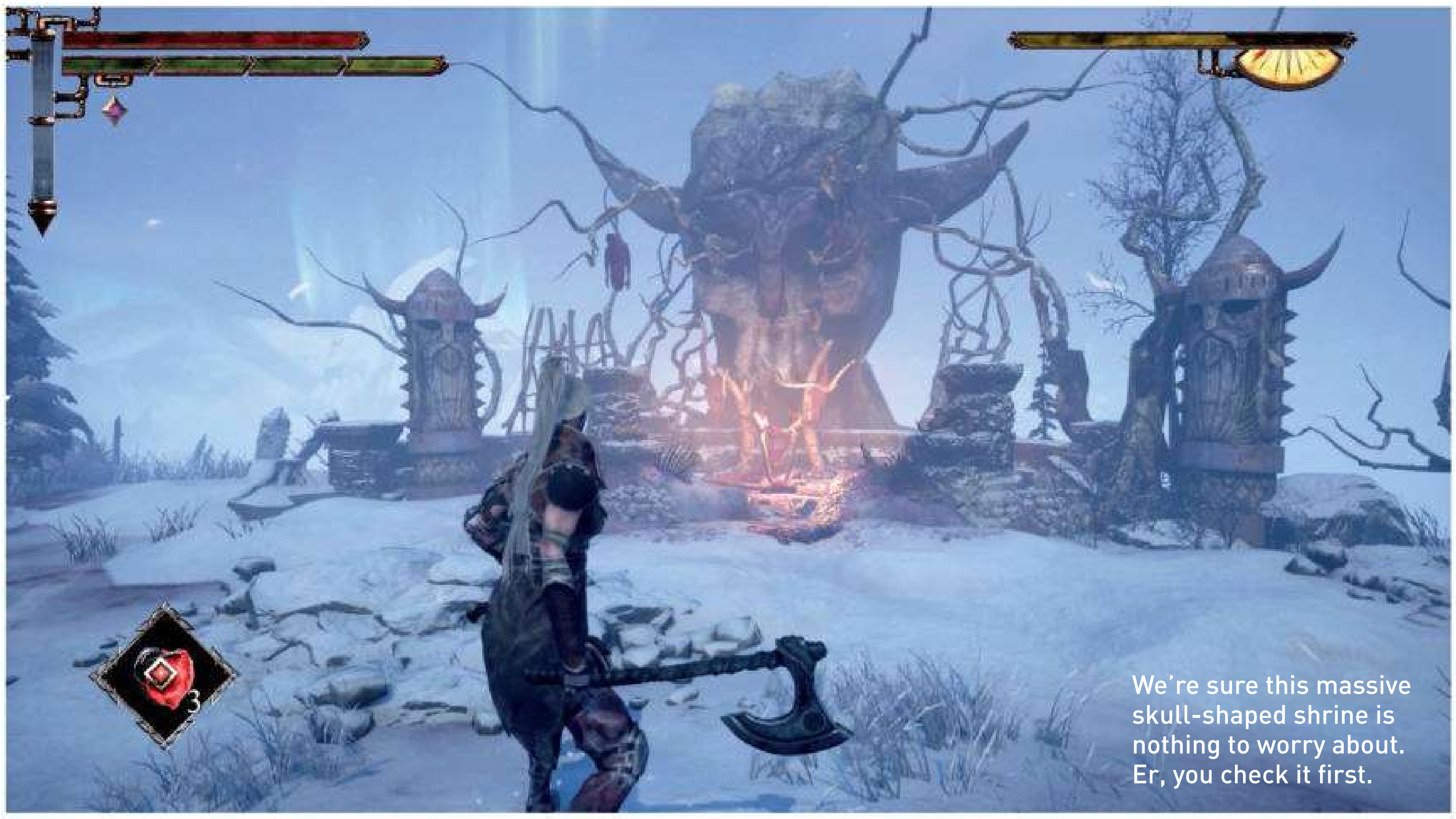
02

Mark's friend Cathy is an eccentric young girl who loves the rain almost as much as she loves gathering gossip and seeking out fresh crushes.


I BELIEVE SHE SAID J-BOY'S GOT IT ALL.

03

Ridel completes the trio, walking softly and carrying a very big camera lens. His photography and short film work fuels the school's rumour mill.


We're sure this massive skull-shaped shrine is nothing to worry about. Er, you check it first.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 23 MAY / **PUB** MERGE GAMES / **DEV** STILL RUNNING / **PLAYERS** 1

Morbid: The Lords Of Ire

Slash-happy soulslike loves slicing red bits out of bodies

We've been waiting impatiently for a terrible soulslike to show up so we can break out all the lazy insults. Elden Wrong. Suck-iro. Bloody-awful-borne, and so on. So it's actually something of a disappointment that Morbid, while never truly breaking the mould, is a promising soulslike with fresh ideas of its own. Bah!

As you'd expect from a game called 'Morbid' this is violent stuff, demonstrating a gleeful flair for spraying blood everywhere. If you've played Dark Souls or any of its many, *many* imitators you'll recognise the brutal combat, high difficulty, deliberate lack of map, focus on finding shortcuts, and boss fights with (*sighs for a thousand years*) 'surprise' second phases.

Morbid mashes up a few older game ideas to create new-ish ones. You can take out enemies faster if you break their stamina and execute a finisher (Hi Sekiro!). You also get a gun (Hi Bloodborne!) that only carries one bullet, and also only reloads when you defeat an enemy. Er, we'd take that dud back to the firearms shop if we were you.

BAR CHOPPING

Enemies quickly prove they're no pushovers. Keep merrily chipping away at an opponent's stamina bar and they'll fly into a rage. At that point you won't be able to lower their stamina any further until you've smacked them with a charged attack. Successfully execute all of that and you're rewarded with the opportunity for a lovely finishing blow, blood sailing across the screen. Going in for the kill also fully restores your stamina bar, encouraging you to get stuck in. Much as we enjoy mocking the impracticality of a gun that only reloads after you've killed someone, mechanically it's a great idea; every successful execution becomes an opportunity to create some breathing room with a bullet, or to temporarily stop an archer who's irritatingly filling you with arrows from afar.

So the combat enjoys a nice rhythm, because you fight the same enemies repeatedly. It's a little too fond of sticking you in combat arenas with multiple axe-wielding nightmares and then running away giggling. Still, we're willing to give it the benefit of the doubt and assume that this is down to a budgetary issue rather than laziness, as this doesn't boast the development budget of an Elden Ring. It's nice to see you can still make a capable soulslike without breaking the bank – a perfectly satisfying bloodbath on a budget.

IMPRESSIONS

We've yet to see anything that helps this stand out from the ridiculously crowded soulslike pack, but fun combat means there's potential. Shame – we were so hoping to call it Dreck Souls…

FACTRICK

1. MIND GAMES

A sanity system trades boosted power for 'great personal risk' and affects how you perceive the world.

2. GOTTA KILL 'EM ALL

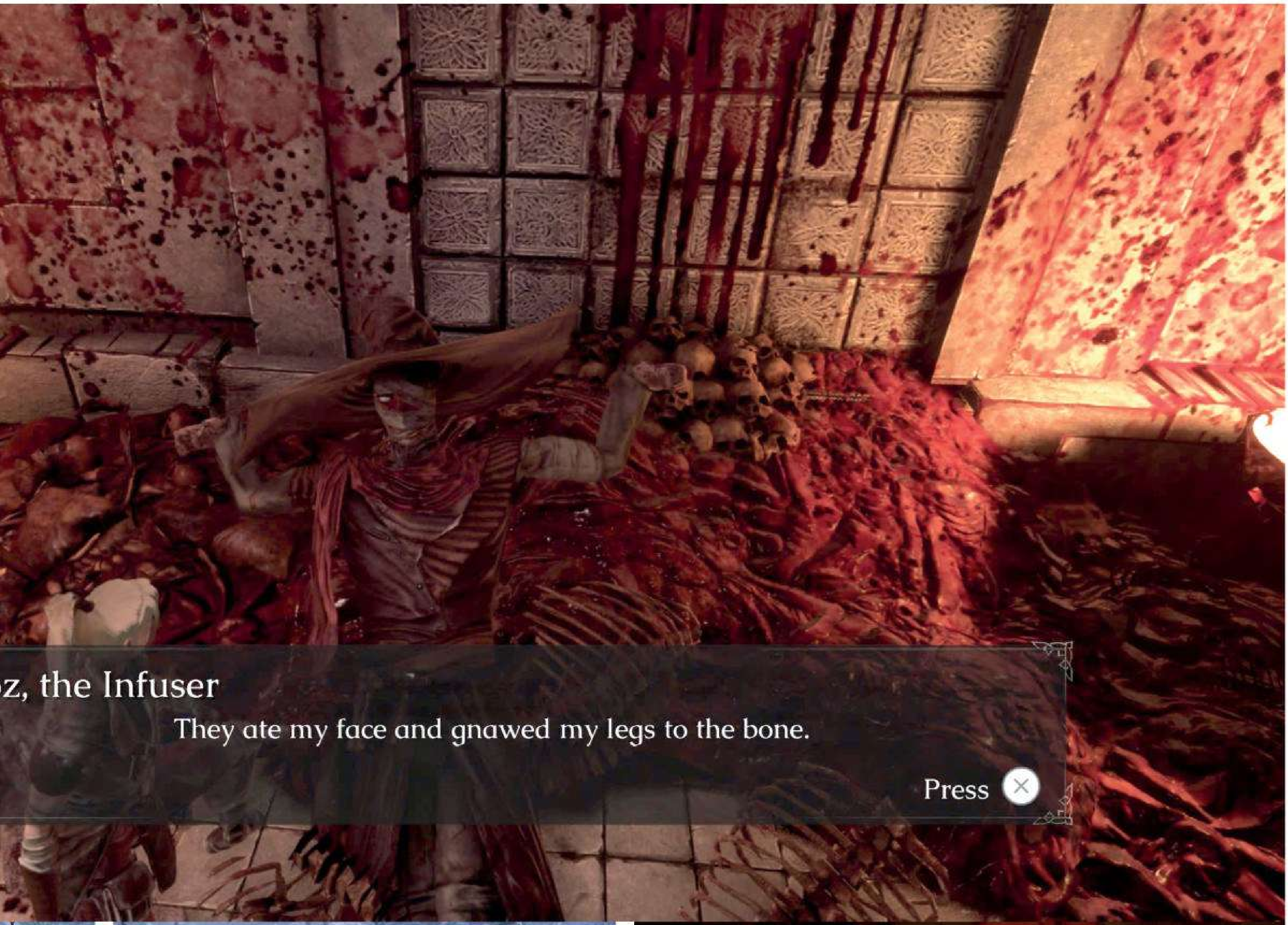
Professor Oak gives you a Pokéde… ahem. Professor *Maximus* gives you a Morbid Menagerie to list creatures.

3. TAKE A BREAK

You can pause *and* you don't lose all your souls-equivalent currency when dying. Will the game be less tense for it?

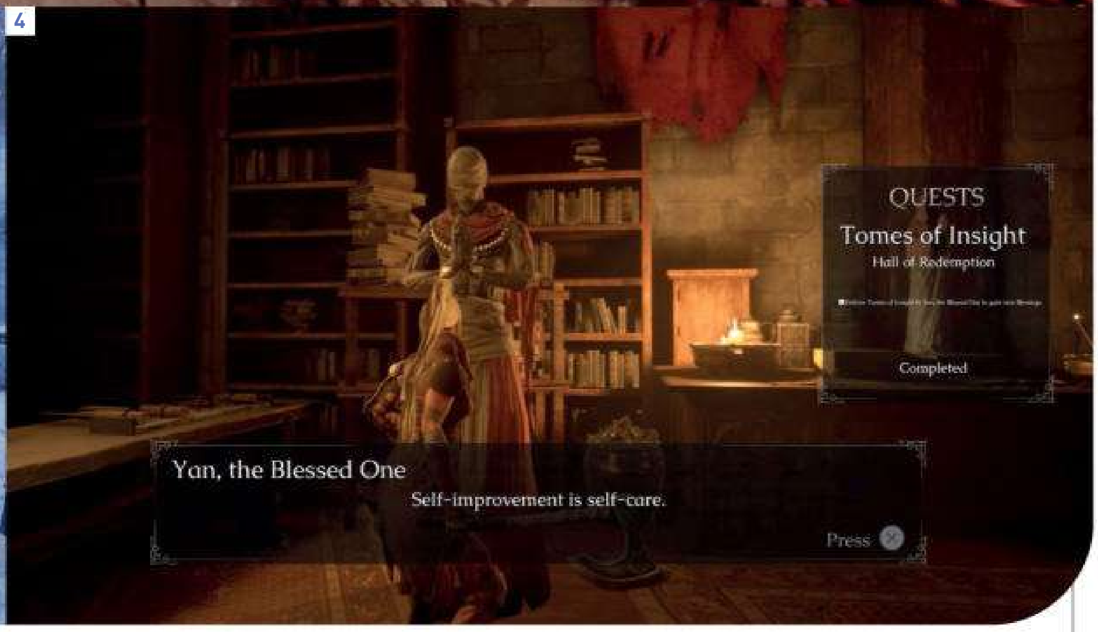
TRACK RECORD This is actually a sequel to Morbid: The Seven Acolytes which was a top-down 2D soulslike that came to PS4 in 2020 and promised 'Cronenbergian gore'. The Lords Of Ire is the blood-spattered series' first leap into 3D. Best of luck!

1 Atoz is surprisingly chipper for a mutilated body who is barely alive. Inspiring! 2 This horned creature is the first boss, which did a fantastic job making us almost miss the deadline for this preview. Boo! 3 It's certainly not an ugly game, but it'll definitely inspire déjà vu in soulslike veterans. 4 We find our daily affirmations in the strangest places…



z, the Infuser

They ate my face and gnawed my legs to the bone.



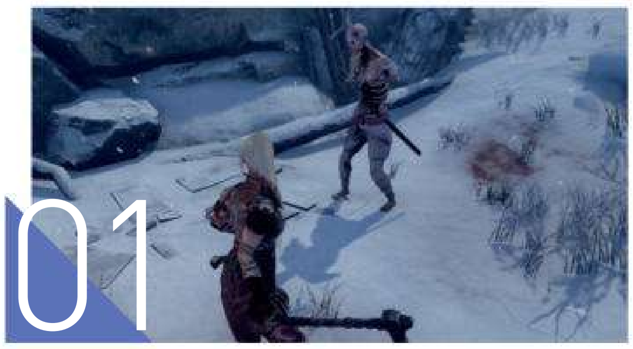
QUESTS
Tomes of Insight
Hall of Redemption
Completed

Yan, the Blessed One

Self-improvement is self-care.

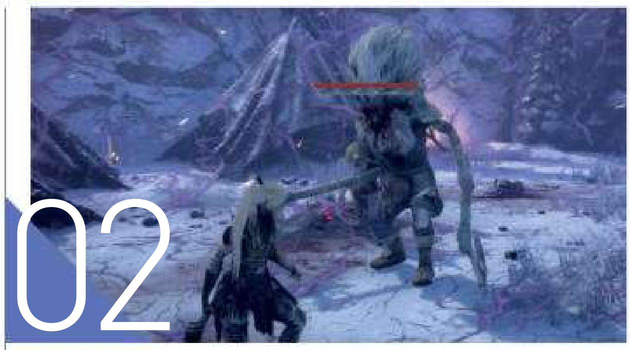
Bloody familiar

The three recurring enemies from Morbid's opening



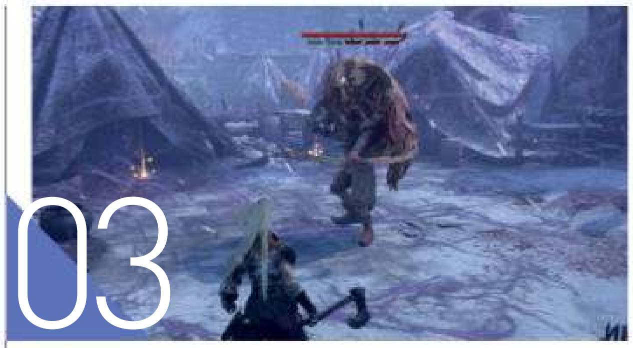
01

Armless but not harmless, these foes will swing what remains of their bodies at you for some surprisingly effective attacks.



02

Great hair! But you're probably better off focussing on those two nasty axes this angry bloke is dual-wielding unless you want a more lethal trim.



03

These archers make our swear jar overflow. Only slightly redeemed by the fact their arrows sometimes hit your enemies too. Ha!

"A DUO OF TALENTED PROXIES, ABLE TO HACK NEW ERIDU'S INFRASTRUCTURE."

Random Play might be a front, but the siblings take video rental seriously. One minigame has you managing the store.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** HOYOVERSE
DEV HOYOVERSE / **PLAYERS** 1 (WITH SOCIAL FEATURES)

Zenless Zone Zero

Double thumbs up for the triple zed

Another gacha live service game from HoYoverse. But put Genshin Impact and Honkai Star Rail out of your mind for a moment. This frenetic character action is less a sign of lack of originality and more a return to an origin point. With super-slick combat that can cross blades with Devil May Cry and a tabletop-like mission structure, this might be a winner.

While gacha does feature, it feels more sidelined in ZZZ. As we're playing through several hours of the story's opening, every main mission defaults to the option to play with preset teams of hack-and-slash Agents at an appropriate level (though you can bring your own squad in if you prefer). It's a similar approach to that taken for the PC-exclusive Honkai Third Impact, and one that manages to feel fresh after we've spent ages mopping our brows to level up legions of characters in other gacha.

FACTRICK

1. SIXTH STREET

You'll find agents you've unlocked wandering around the block. Chat to them and you can grow closer.

2. ARCADE POWER

Of Sixth Street's many attractions, there's even an arcade where you can play minigames like Snake.

3. AIR WAVES

Like in HoYoverse's other titles, your PS5 data is cross-save, meaning you can swap between PS5 and mobile.

ON THE PULL

You *will* need to dip into gacha if you want to nab certain characters as they rotate in and out of timed banners. It's just as generous here as in HoYoverse's other titles (the developer is one of the few to strike a good balance), but those who find themselves easily compelled to part with cash to avoid FOMO should be warned. It's less obtrusive than ever, but still a factor – one that may well increase as you reach an eventual endgame.

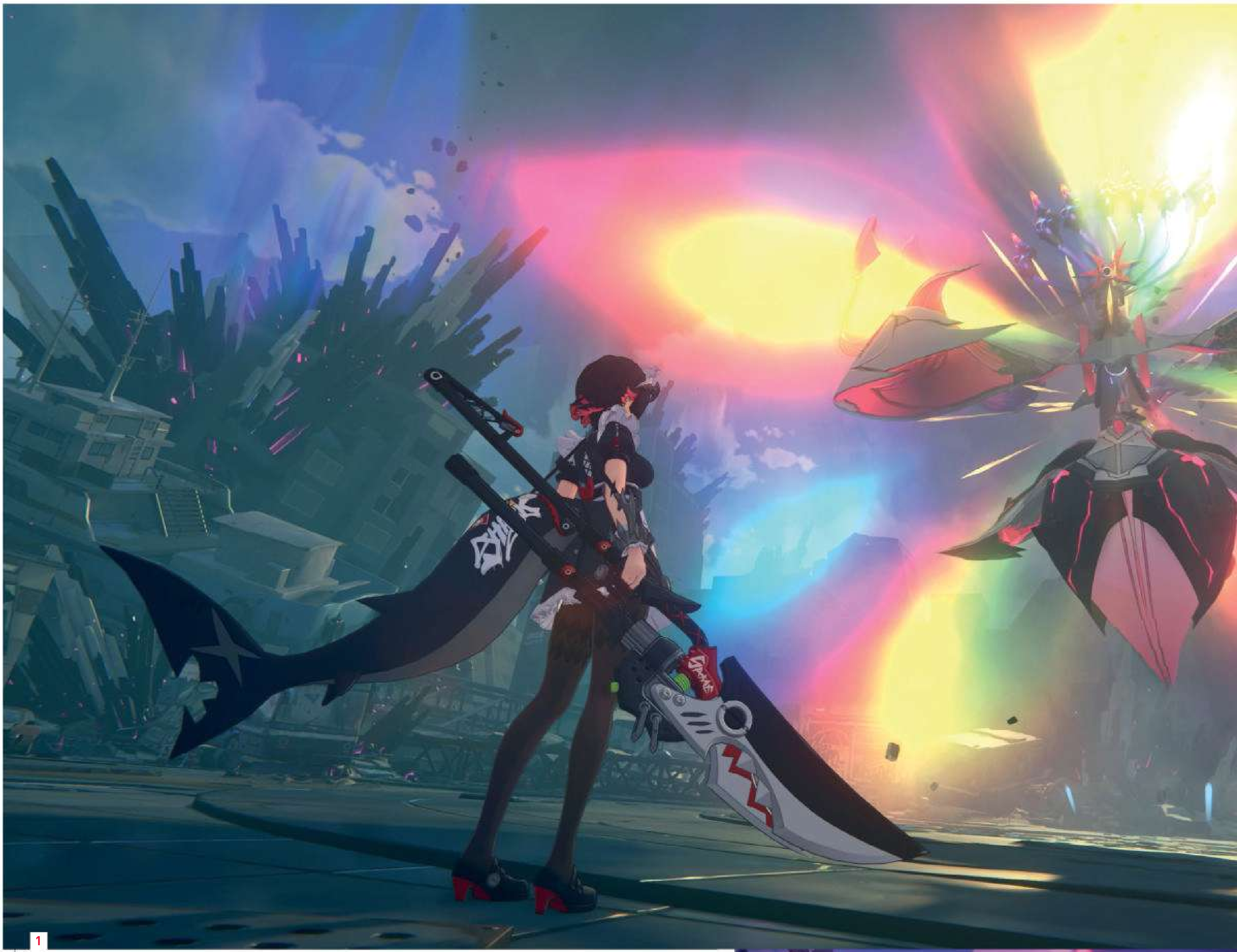
The missions you'll be readying these characters to take on take place in Hollows. These spots within the high-tech New Eridu twist the city into labyrinthine death traps, where monstrous Ethereals roam. Spend too long inside and if you don't cop it, you'll become one of the creatures yourself.

Choosing to play as either Belle or Wise, you make up a sibling duo of talented Proxies, able to hack New Eridu's infrastructure and, crucially, pilot the legion of rabbit-like Bangboo bots to guide those within a Hollow through the ever-shifting world.

That's all an excuse to put you in charge of a squad of three characters, all of whom sport incredibly extra style, ooze personality, and are loaded with their own particular weapons and combos. Early on you assist The Cunning Hares, a group of thieves with hearts of gold, but your talents as a proxy will quickly lead you to meet the city's other colourful factions as well.

Every new pal is a joy to meet and wonderfully animated. Cyborg Billy Kidd's robotic features squash and stretch Spider-Man-style to relay his enthusiastic personality. The feline Nekomiya, on the other hand, hides her fierce true self behind a cutesy exterior you might expect from a catgirl before dropping foes with pouncing twirls. Even the NPCs around town – you can explore the city block around your »

TRACK RECORD HoYoverse has become master of the gacha live service game thanks to Genshin Impact and Honkai Star Rail, which deliver generous free-to-play experiences… if you can resist the allure of optional microtransactions.



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video-rental hideout between Hollow deployments – lean into this. The local newspaper is sold by a dog in a suit; ramen chef General Chop, who sells you stat-buffing bowls of soup, has a big tengu-mask-like head and robot arms for stretching out noodles; and Coff Café is presided over by a Tin Master barista with a grinder for a head. Naturally, like much else in Zenless Zone Zero, ordering food and drink is accompanied by a luxurious animation sequence. This is the liveliest game HoYoverse has made to date, packed with creativity.

TAG TEAM

Just as lively is the combat, which makes full use of your squad of three by having you build up combos and then tag-team the next character in for another strike. It's possible to rotate through your team and beyond, returning to previous Agents should you get a lengthy combo going.

Chaining together basic attacks is what gives you energy for these blowouts, activated with a heavy attack, making it feel like you're tapping out long sequences of hits like in a fighting game. The same goes for parries, which see a teammate join the fray to deflect the strike, but dodge instead and time will slow, allowing you to get limited hits in on the vulnerable enemy but then build into *another* tag-team combo. You're always revving up, and when the engine gets going it's almost always spectacular to let loose.

Characters feel like they have particular uses as well, with Billy's long-range guns being better in some situations than the saw-blade-wielding Corina's button-holding buzzing. Shut a foe down, though, and Corina can stack up those damage numbers.

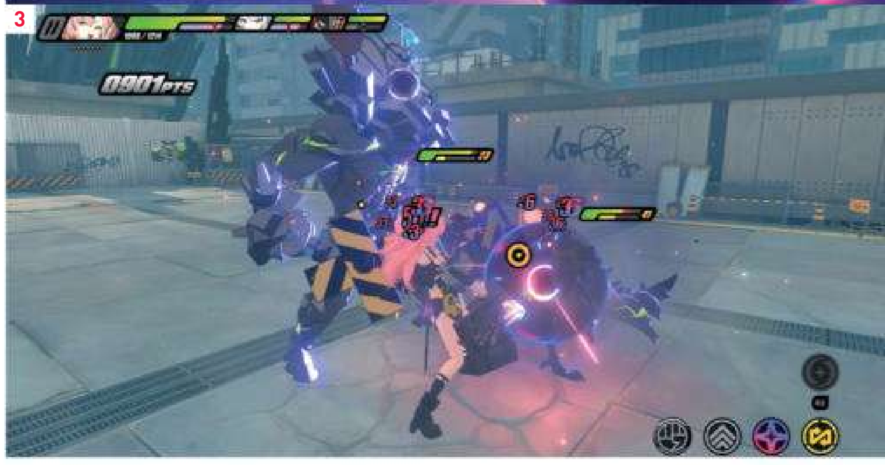
The arenas you fight in are pretty and colourful, but can feel a bit basic. Missions usually involve moving around a grid of TVs with some light puzzle solving (which works better than you might think), but that does mean scraps are bite-size. Fun enough to start with, though after several hours things are beginning to get a bit repetitive. But with a solid story that teases some engaging tales of megacorps crossing the line, we're hooked enough to want to see it through to the end.

IMPRESSIONS

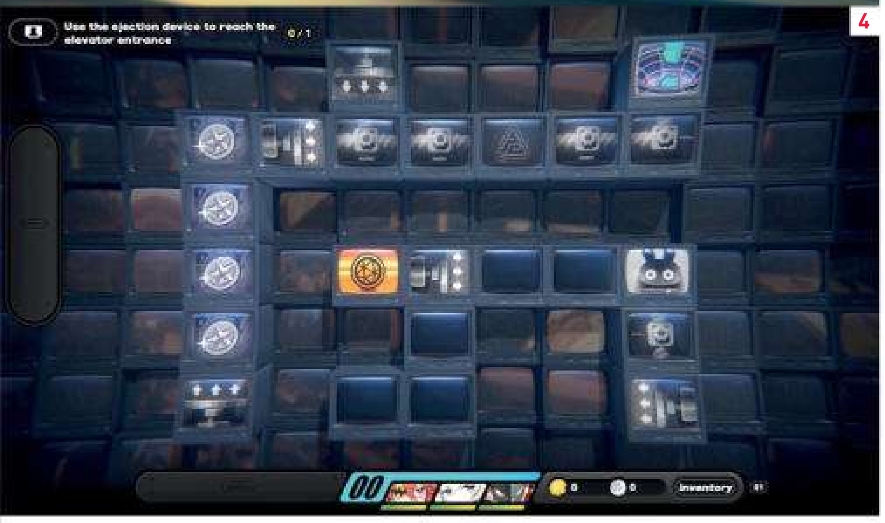
HoYoverse's most creatively ambitious outing yet, with engaging combat and interesting boardgame-like mechanics. But we do wonder if the structure will keep us engaged in the long run.

2

3

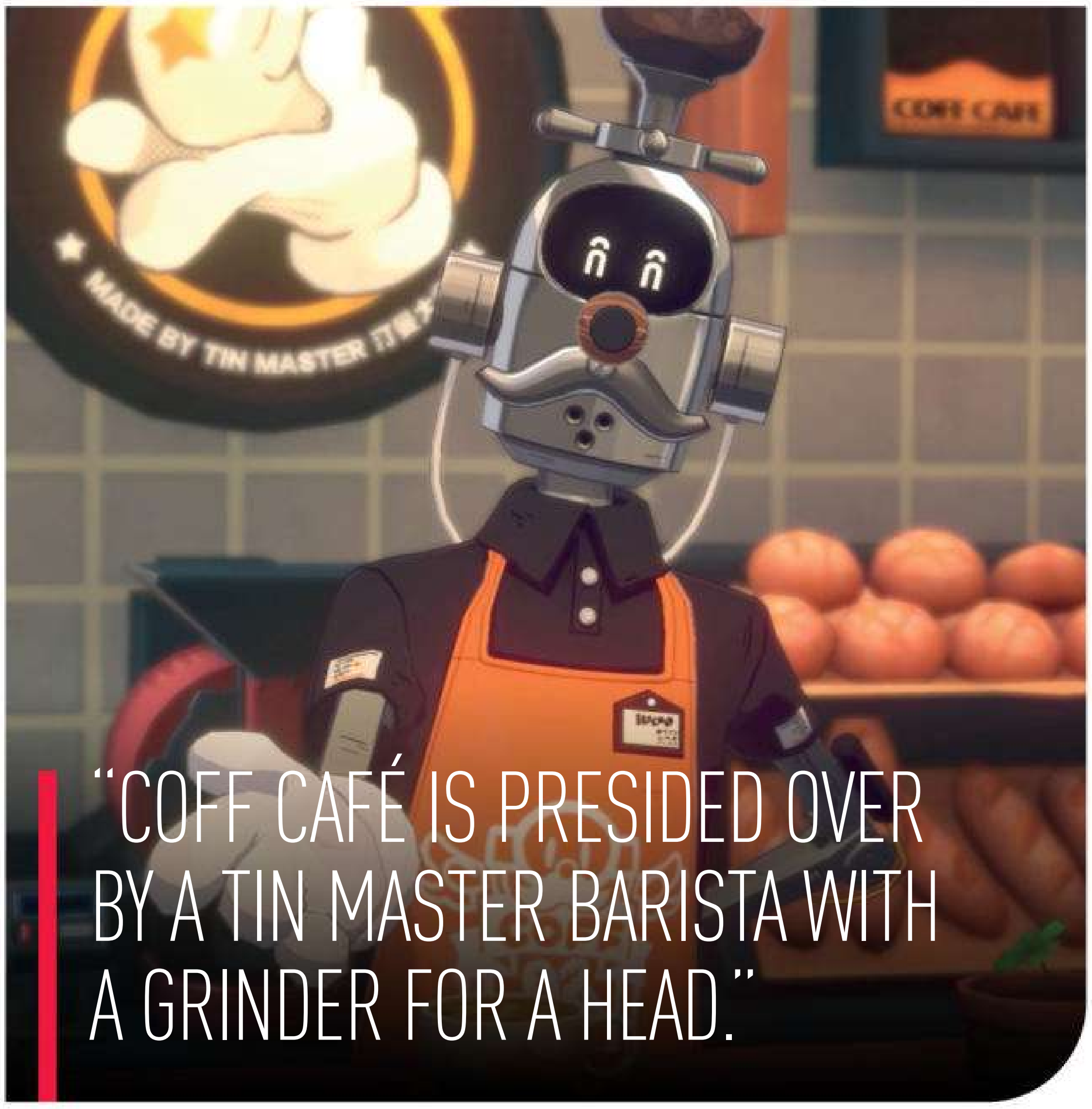


1 ZZZ boasts fun and creative character and enemy designs. Ellen Joe doesn't just have a shark-themed spear, she has a shark… as a tail!? 2 Build up enough energy and you can bring out each Agent's ultimate moves. 3 Parries, dodges, combo attacks, and big ol' blasts. Being surrounded presents more opportunities for fun than frustration. 4 Missions have you move between TV squares to nab bonuses and get into fights.


Use the ejection device to reach the elevator entrance
0 / 1
Inventory

4

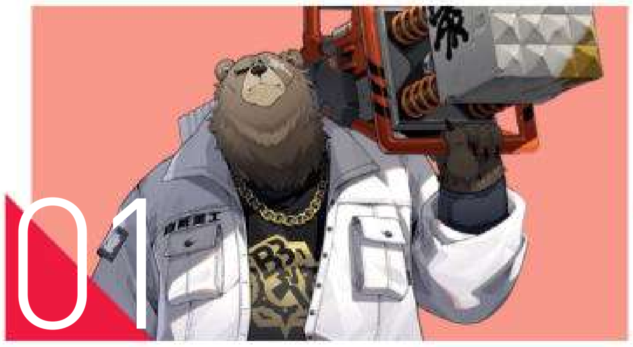
Be sure to support Sixth Street's local businesses. Delish.


MADE BY TIN MASTER
COFF CAFE

> "COFF CAFÉ IS PRESIDED OVER BY A TIN MASTER BARISTA WITH A GRINDER FOR A HEAD."

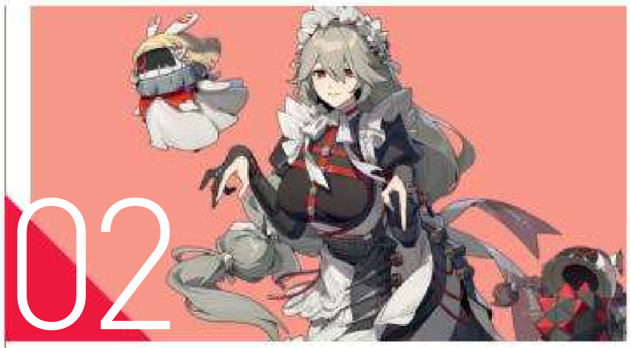
New Eridu yellow pages

Some of the heroes you can Proxy for



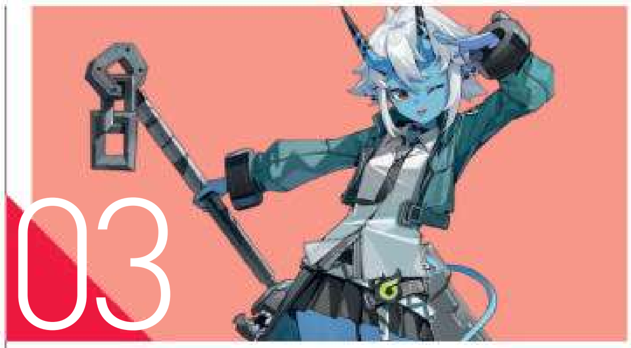
01

Ben Bigger has incredible style, and fights with a huge pillar. A maths nerd at heart, he just wants to shut thugs up so he can return to doing calculations.



02

Alexandrina (Rina for short) works for the surprisingly deadly Victoria Housekeeping. Her floating musician dolls deliver destruction.



03

Soukaku is both a member and 'asset' of HSO's mysterious Section 6. The only thing bigger than her massive, transforming axe is her appetite.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 24 APR / **PUB** BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT / **DEV** ILCA / **PLAYERS** 1

Sand Land

Tanks for the memories, Akira Toriyama

There's a bittersweet feeling to playing Sand Land following the news of the untimely passing of its creator, legendary manga artist Akira Toriyama. Yet it also feels apt that one of the Dragon Ball creator's lesser-known works gets to have its time in the sun in this action RPG adaptation that you could summarise as 'Mad Max in a world with mischievous demons and plenty of tanks'.

The demon in question is the Fiend Prince, Beelzebub – pink, pint-sized, hair worn up just like a Super Saiyan – who claims to be evil despite never having killed anyone (think harmless prankster more than mass murderer). Nonetheless, demons are feared by humans, so it's an unlikely alliance when he teams up with Rao, an elderly sheriff who's on a journey to find the Legendary Spring to save the people of Sand Land, where there's a serious shortage of water (all while the greedy king is profiting from his private water supply). Given that Belz is actually around 2,500 years old, while his chaperone demon Thief also resembles an old man, this might be the most unusually geriatric RPG party since Like A Dragon's middle-aged posse hit Hawaii's streets.

FACTRICK

1. SHOW TIME

Ahead of the game's launch on 26 April, an anime series of Sand Land is now streaming on Disney+.

2. DEMON ETYMOLOGY

The name Beelzebub is derived from an ancient Philistine god meaning the Lord Of The Flies.

3. TANK TROUBLE

Toriyama had difficulty drawing the series' iconic tank, a probable factor in the manga's short run.

Perhaps for balance, this game adaptation includes a new, Toriyama-created, female party member who we meet later in the story, a self-proclaimed ace mechanic called Ann. The environments have likewise been given extra variety, so rather than spend an entire open world game surrounded by beige desert sand we'll also visit a new, more verdant, zone named rather simply Forest Land. Even one underground dungeon adds visual variety, including puzzles that revolve around controlling water levels. But given one of the key narratives from the manga is that water is scarce, you might have to take these additions with a pinch of salt.

"CHARACTER COMBAT IS NOT THE REAL DRAW – THAT WOULD BE THE VEHICLES."

HELLS BELZ

Don't, however, go in thinking this is a party-based RPG. We mainly control Belz, who fights with some scrappy melee and a few specials that require building up a Dark energy meter. His allies, meanwhile, provide only passive abilities, and though each has their own skill tree, our basic scraps aren't the best at illustrating their effectiveness. But then character combat, or the occasionally antiquated insta-fail stealth missions, are not the real draw – that would be the vehicles.

From the moment we steal the iconic tank, getting in a ride is the best solution whether you're travelling or in combat. The tank may be slow and prone to overheating if you speed-boost too often, while its stubby shape (remember smart cars?) means we're occasionally unsure of the direction it's facing. But watching the crosshairs turn red when lined up with a target, there's a simple pleasure to pulling back R2 to fire a tank shell and seeing just how ridiculous the damage is, whether it's used on a group of soldiers, roaming raptors, or indeed other tanks. So that we're not completely overpowered, ammo does take a while to reload.

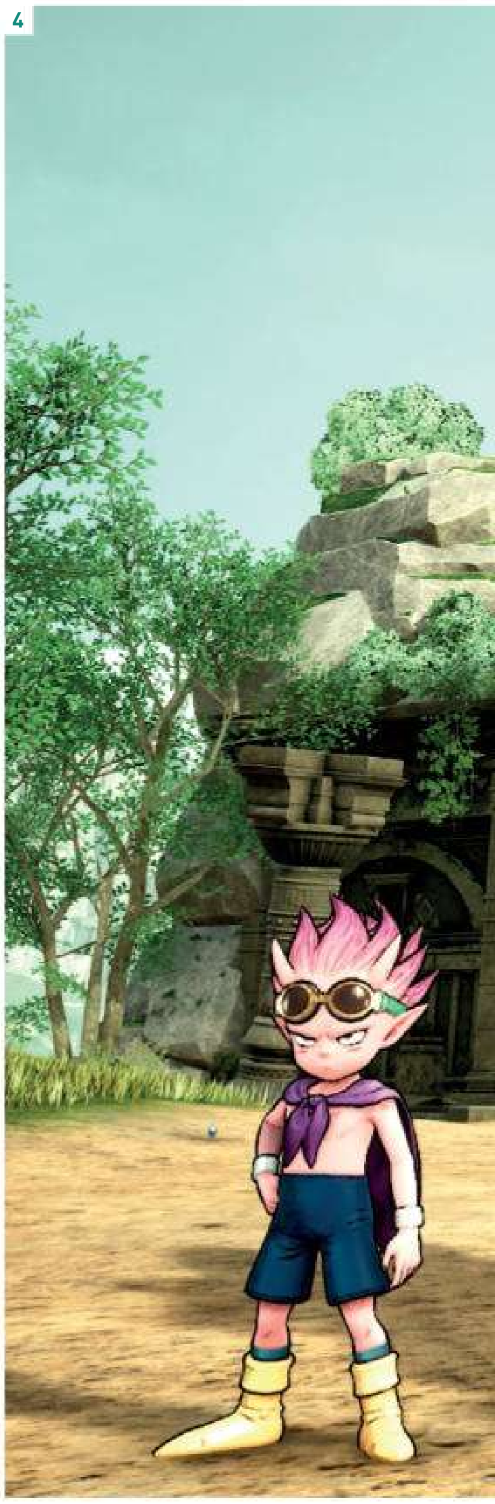
It's tempting to stick with the tank the whole time, especially as it's got the highest defence of any vehicle, though there's just as much reason to switch between them. The motorcycle is best for speedy traversal despite being at risk of being blown apart from a direct hit from an enemy tank. The walker mech can jump up to high platforms but its grenade launcher has a firing arc that's not as immediate as tank shells. The hovercraft, meanwhile, is essential for crossing water and arguably the most manouevrable. The good thing is that once you're in a vehicle, switching to another is as simple as tapping → on the D-pad, then picking it from a selection wheel.

It's definitely an aspect where Sand Land can excel in the long term – from defeating enemies (and acquiring loot) to mining resources for upgrading vehicle parts to customising their looks, it's all engaging. You can also expect vehicle-based side-activities such as races to keep you in the desert for longer.

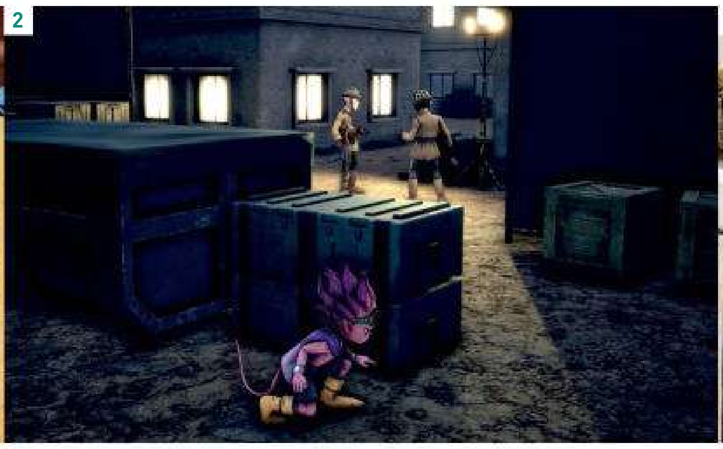
IMPRESSIONS

Shows an effort to make a more varied package than the original manga, with approachable vehicular travel and combat offering something different from other party-based action RPGs.

TRACK RECORD Tokyo-based ILCA started as a support studio working on Japanese IPs like Yakuza and Dragon Quest, though it's been best known more recently for its partnerships with Bandai Namco, including as the developer of One Piece Odyssey.



4 This mech, acquired later on, adds weight to vehicular action as well as more melee-focussed combat. 5 Vehicles can be used in dungeons too, though you might have to navigate some cramped spaces. 6 While there are monsters to fight, humans, such as General Are of the Royal Army, are Sand Land's biggest threats.



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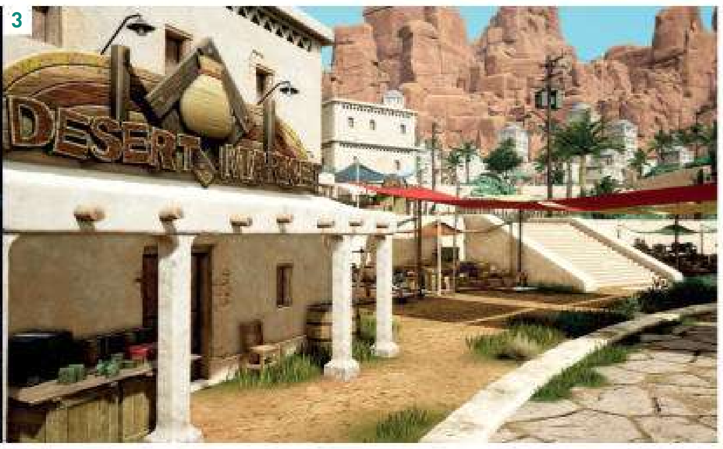

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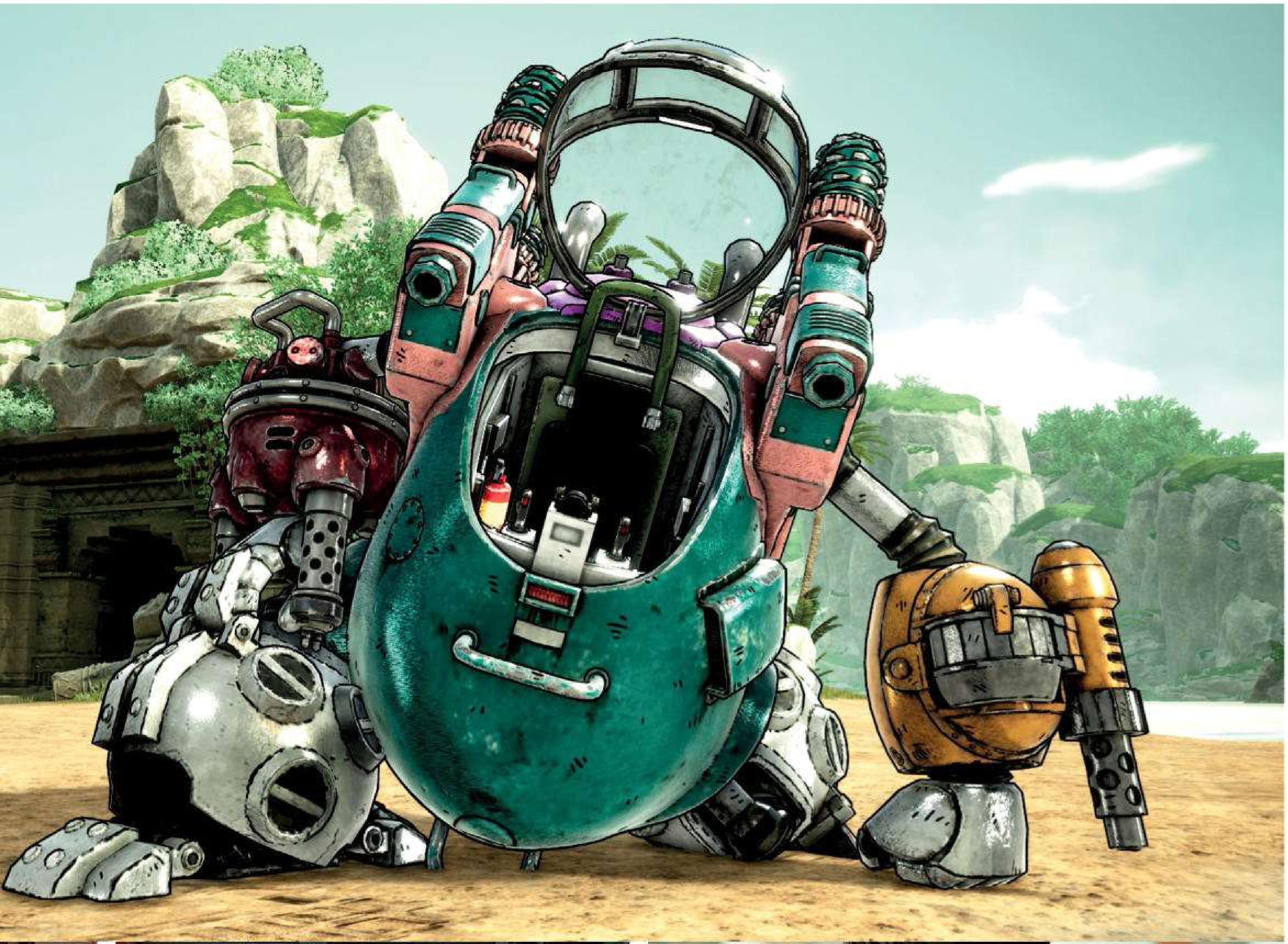
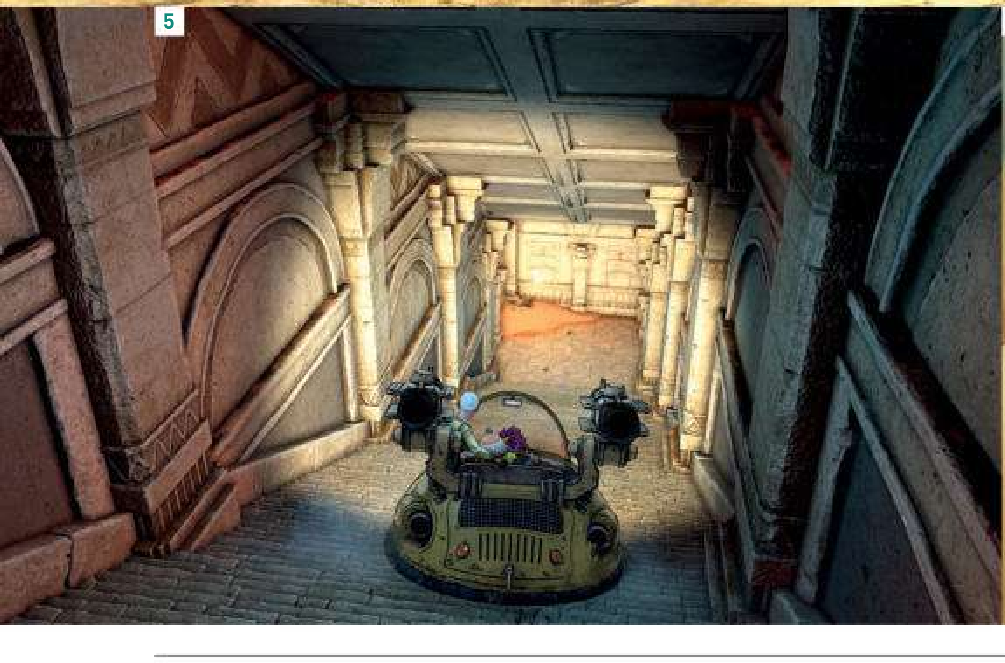
1 Given his childish personality, it's no surprise that Belz is also a bit of a gamer. **2** You can stealthily crouch-walk by holding L2, while stealth takedowns involve Belz scaring his enemies unconscious. **3** The desert city of Spino acts as your hub. It's where you can get upgrades or pick up side-quests.





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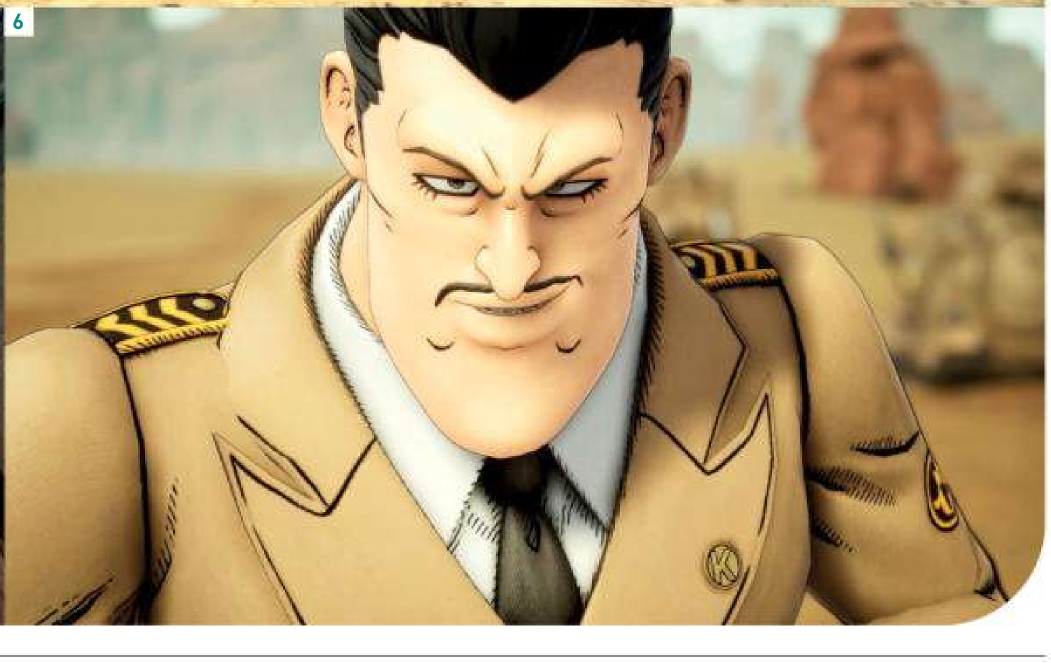

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FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** OUT NOW / **PUB** KOEI TECMO / **DEV** TEAM NINJA / **PLAYERS** 1 (OFFLINE), 2-3 (ONLINE)

Rise Of The Ronin

They see my ronin, they hatin', patrollin' tryna catch me fightin' dirty

We only review finished games, so in Viewpoint we go hands-on with near-final code of a game that just missed our review deadline. After the first eight hours with Team Ninja's latest, Luke Kemp has sword of got the hang of it.

As we fight a boar the size of a minivan, magical healing pills in one pocket and instantly deployable hang glider in the other, we suspect that Team Ninja may have taken some *slight* liberties with the ol' historical accuracy. Mind you, that's the whole point really – and everything we've seen so far indicates that this was very much the right decision.

This is the Japan of the late 19th century, at the beginning of the transition to the modern era when, for better or for worse, Western influence has shaped architecture and aspects of Japanese society and infrastructure. Historical figures, organisations, and events are included here but by and large, it's best to consider these set dressing rather than educational materials.

Team Ninja's approach in Rise Of The Ronin, we decide, needs its own subgenre. While it's tempting to describe the game as a soulslike, we lean more towards souls*ish*. There are familiar elements, for sure. Mastering parries and dodges is crucial, sloppiness with a sword can (and will) lead to a swift death, and getting slain by a foe leaves you with one chance to defeat them and regain your unbanked XP. Looking at the big picture though, Rise Of The Ronin is far more forgiving than a soulslike.

There are checkpoints and regular opportunities to save your progress (sharp intake of breath from Souls diehards), three difficulty options (another sharp intake of breath), and you can switch between them during the course of the game (intake of breath so sharp that fainting ensues). If you want the traditional Team Ninja experience of difficulty so high the game seems to actively resent your presence, you can absolutely have that by sticking to playing on the highest difficulty.

ALL RISE

Even so, we wouldn't go so far as to call any option 'easy'. No matter which difficulty you go for, combat is great fun. Our first encounters make it clear that the cost of failing to pay attention will be paid in blood, and it only gets tougher from there. Stamina (here called Ki) is sapped with each attack or dodge, the maximum amount of which can be reduced for both you and your enemies via parries ('countersparks'). Depleted Ki means brief but total vulnerability.

A successful counterspark is, without fail, satisfying every single time – as is the flurry of blows you can get in if you're quick. Upgrades include the ability to instantly kill minions when they're weak, and even to send projectiles back at your attacker with a counterspark. You can use items and firearms during combat, too. We weaken one particularly tricky foe by softening them up with a pistol before moving in with a comically large blade and lopping off their head, which then spins through the air like a shocked-looking football.

Let's not forget about the open world, though. Perhaps due to the developer's experience with more linear action games, the large map (at least, the one we've explored so far) never threatens to slow the pace unless we want it to. The glider is given to us fairly early on, and offers a simple (though highly enjoyable) way to leap from high places without decorating the ground with our insides. A little further into the game we get a horsey (which can be summoned almost anywhere outside of missions), and there are plenty of fast travel spots on top of that. While we love the grappling hook once we get it (we mean, come on, it's a grappling hook!), its use is, to be honest, too restricted to be of much use when it comes to traversal.

The open world is indicative of a wider storytelling scope than you might expect of something like Ninja Gaiden. There's stacks of dialogue, quiet moments in towns and villages, and lots of side-content. There are bonds to be formed with named characters which lead to combat benefits, and even some spots in the upgrade tree which unlock dialogue options. You can also seek out cats to pet, which of course we do.

There's a welcome dose of humour; subtle, and not constant, but all the better for it. There are also some moments that we *think* aren't supposed to be funny, but tickle us greatly anyway. A fight with a sword-wielding drunk encapsulates all of this pretty well. Despite the fact that we've cut him multiple times (and with great enthusiasm) using a blade that's decapitated multiple people within the past hour, at the end of the fight he barely seems to notice, and falls asleep. When we meet him again, now sober, he becomes a friend. This is a game that promises great things.

VIEWPOINT

"TEAM NINJA'S EXPERIENCE WEARING AN OPEN-WORLD SUIT, WITH NO DESIGN CLASHES. IF THE REST OF THE GAME KEEPS THIS UP, IT COULD BE A CUT ABOVE."

We'll have our full, in-depth review of Rise Of The Ronin in the next issue.

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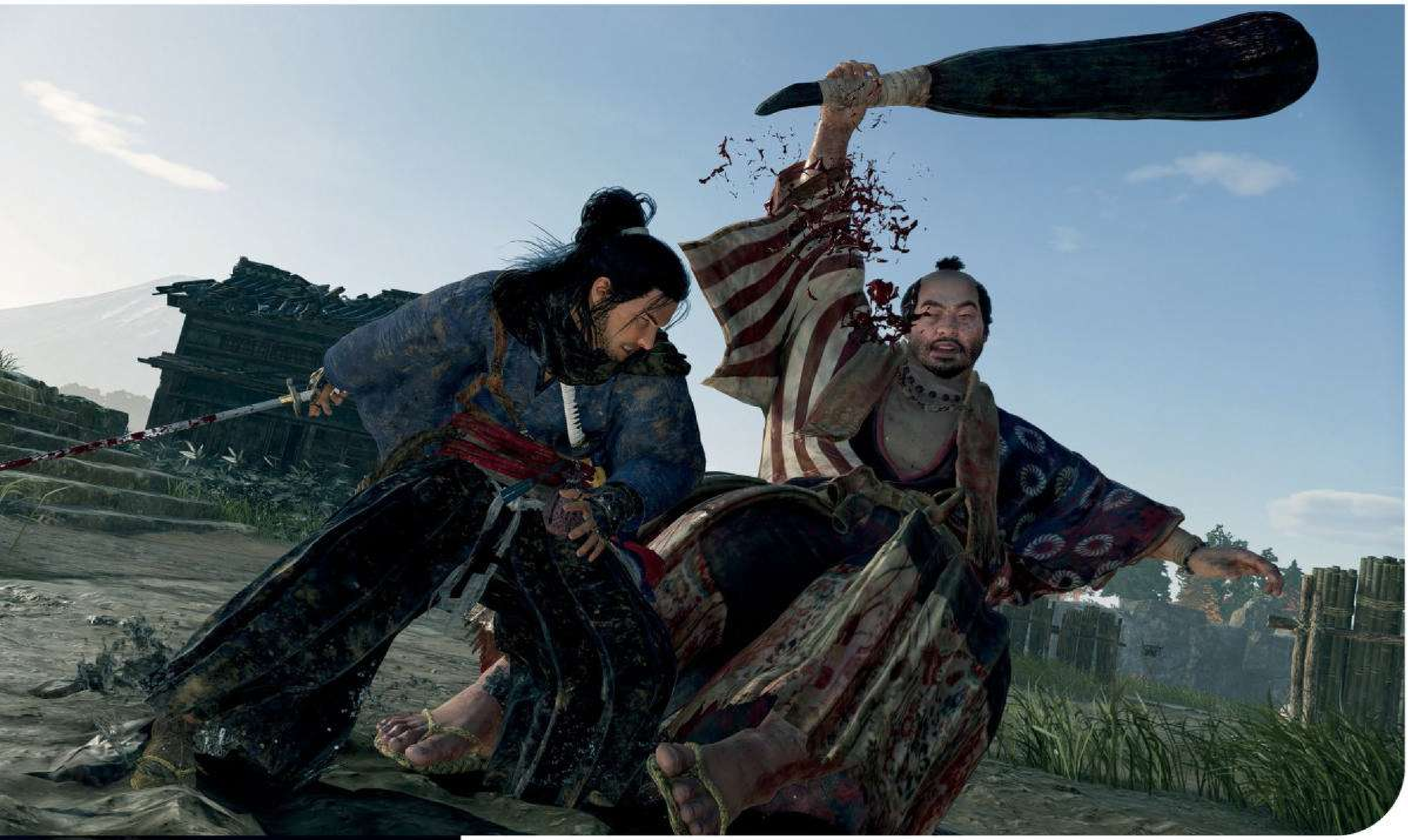

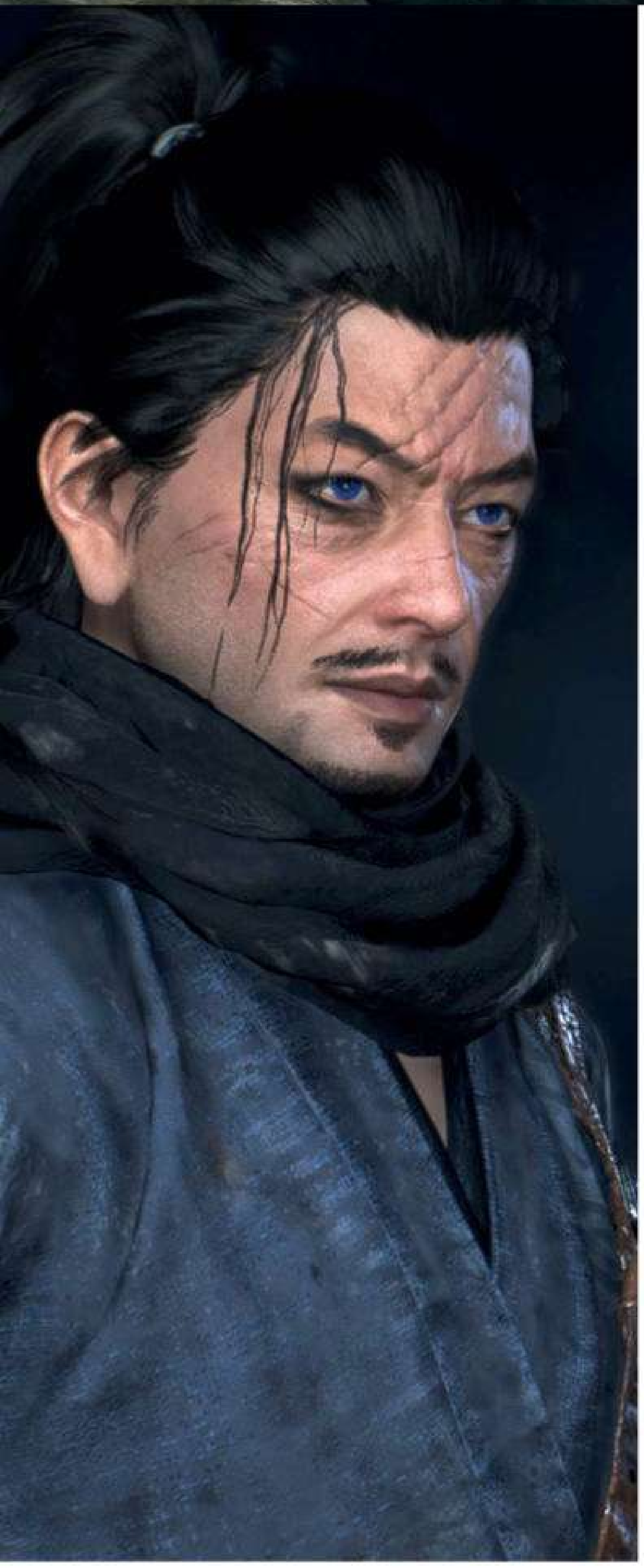

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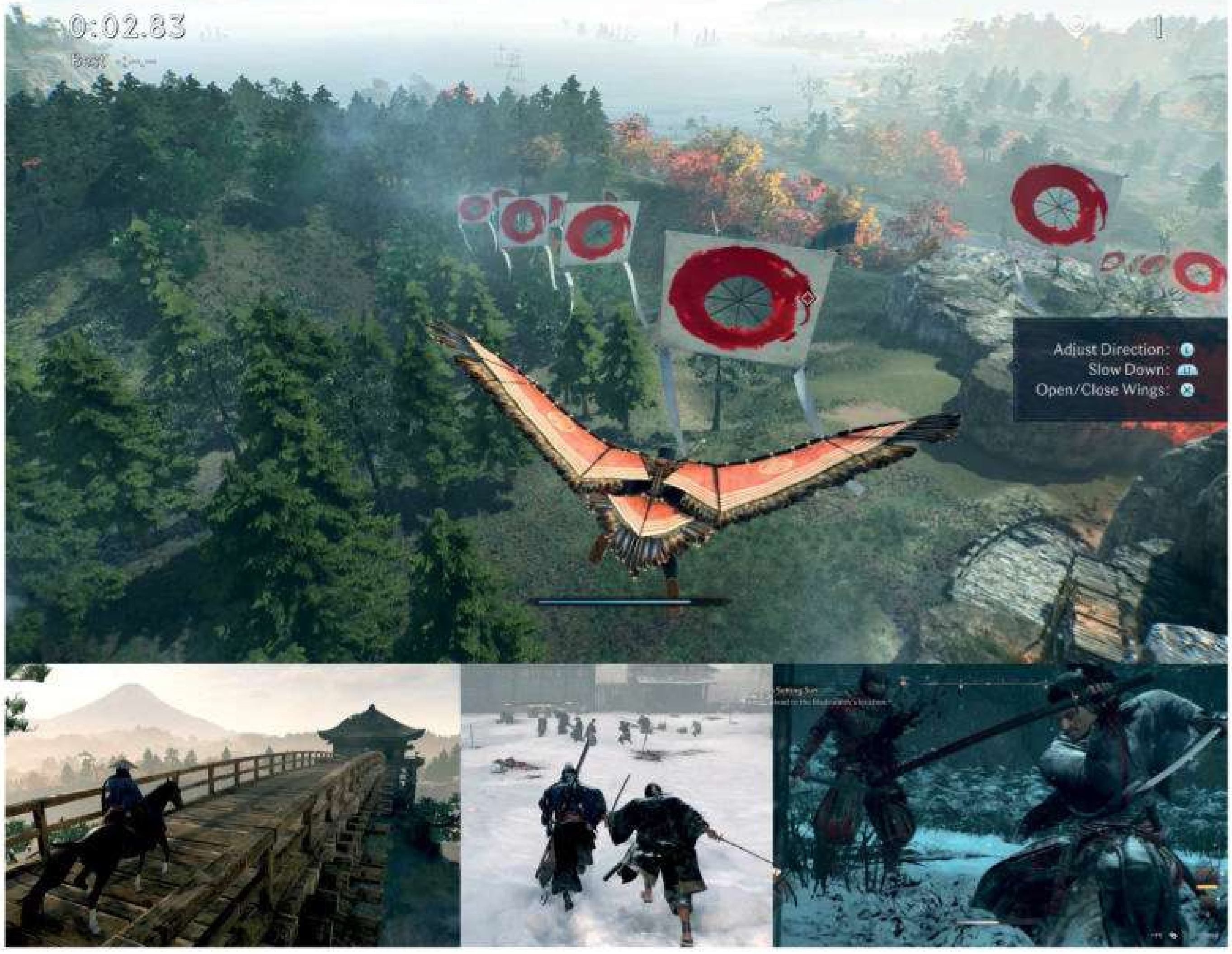

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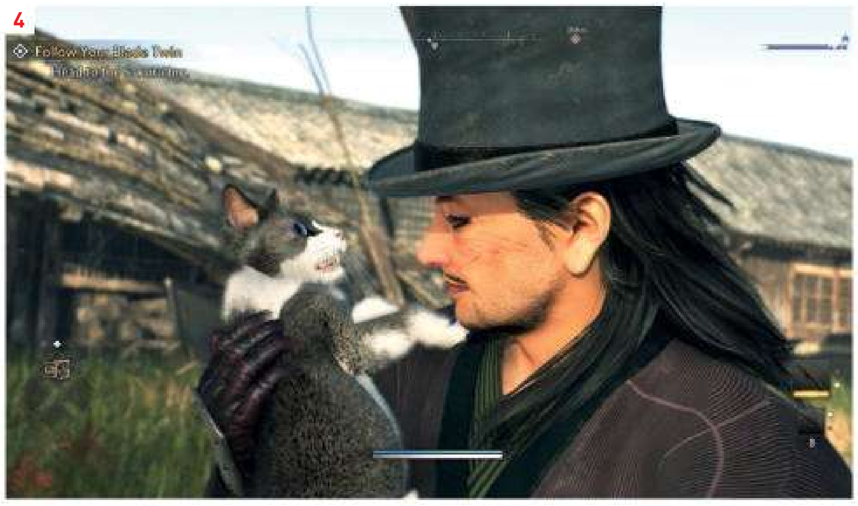
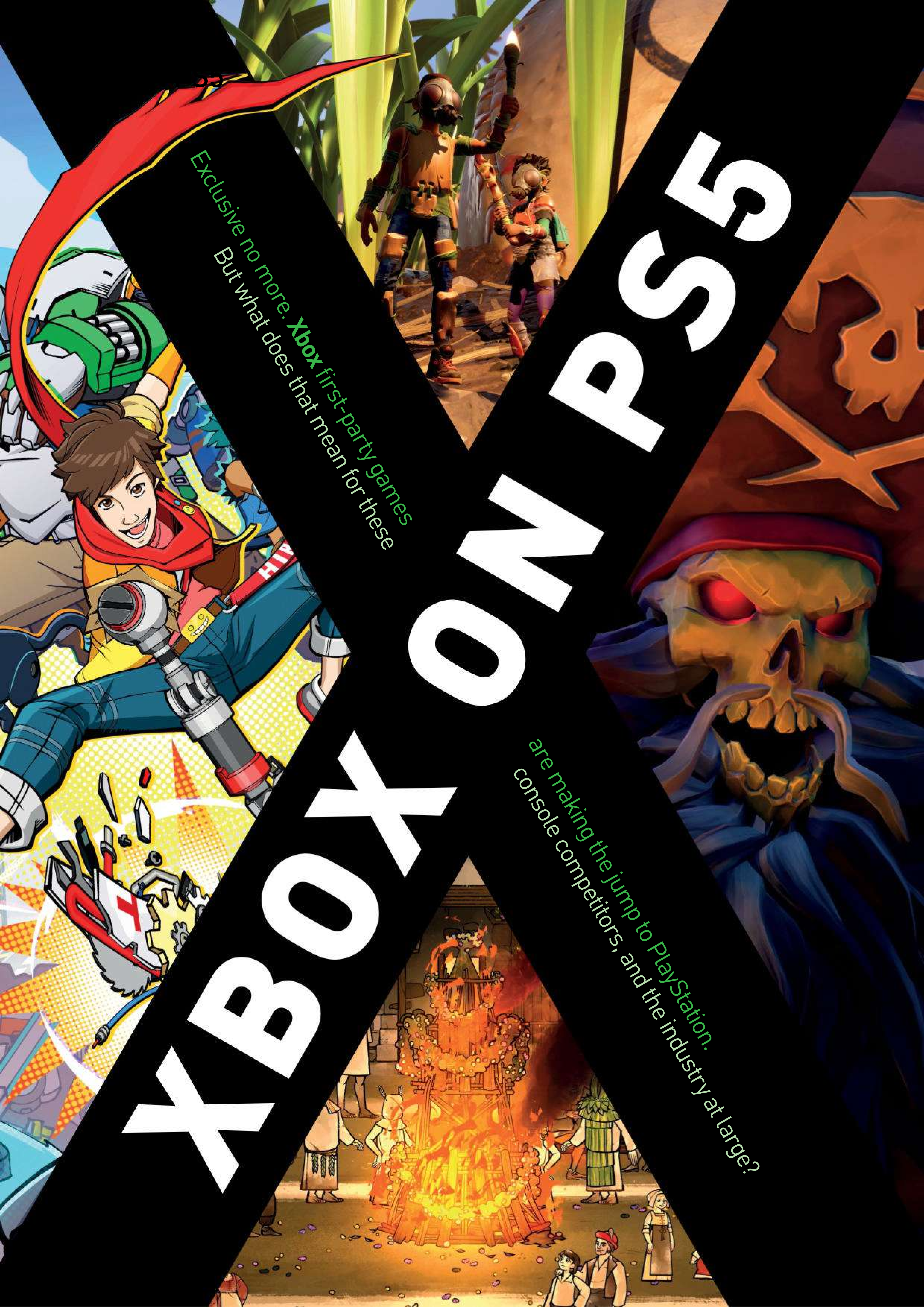
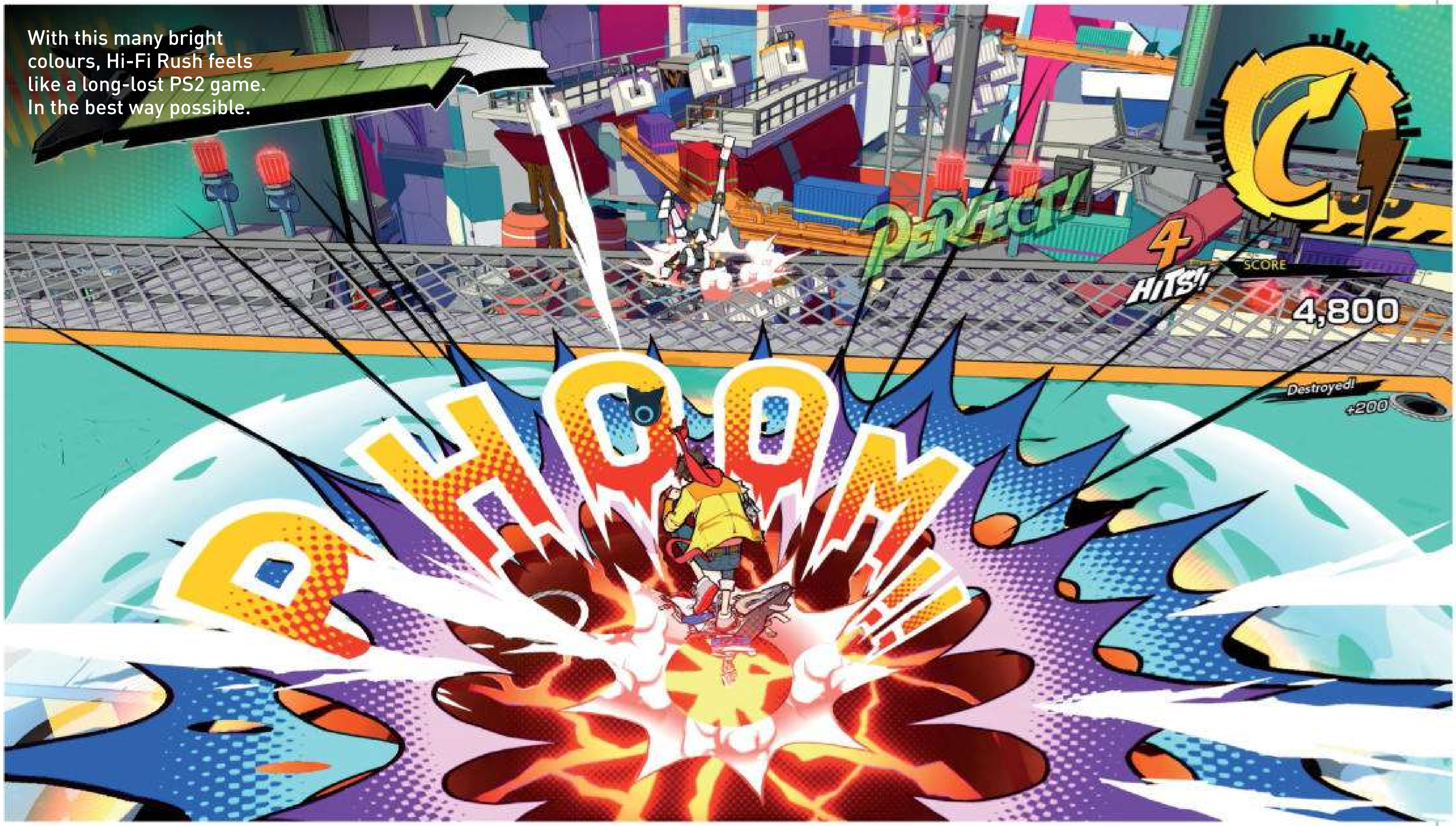


1 The animation is the cherry in the delicious combat cocktail. You look every bit as cool as you feel. 2 The character creator is pretty in-depth, allowing you to shape the appearance of your ronin. There's even an option to tinker with underwear settings but, er, we haven't found out why that might be yet. 3 You probably don't need us to explain what's going on here, but suffice to say, taking on side-activities with your weapons and equipment will be rewarded. 4 Aw, look at the kitty! There's an NPC who will reward you for finding as many cats as you can, but we'd hunt down the wickle cuties regardless.



XBOX ON PS5

Exclusive no more. **Xbox** first-party games are making the jump to PlayStation. But what does that mean for these console competitors, and the industry at large?



With this many bright colours, Hi-Fi Rush feels like a long-lost PS2 game. In the best way possible.

Hi-Fi Rush. Sea Of Thieves. Grounded. Pentiment. Four innocuous videogame titles – or they would be, if they didn't represent what might be one of the biggest industry shifts we've seen… ever. These four games were formerly Xbox exclusives, and now they're coming to PlayStation.

Make no mistake, the white obelisks next to our TVs aren't only competitors to Xbox, they're *the* competitor in a way Nintendo Switch and PC aren't. While we've seen Xbox games on PlayStation before, they've always felt like technicalities. Xbox bought Minecraft after the phenomenon was everywhere – so why take it away? Likewise, Double Fine platformer Psychonauts 2 had been announced as multi-platform before the developer was bought by Microsoft, and had taken funding money from consumers with that promise. Similarly, Call Of Duty is too well established as multi-platform for loyal fans ready to spend money on their series of choice.

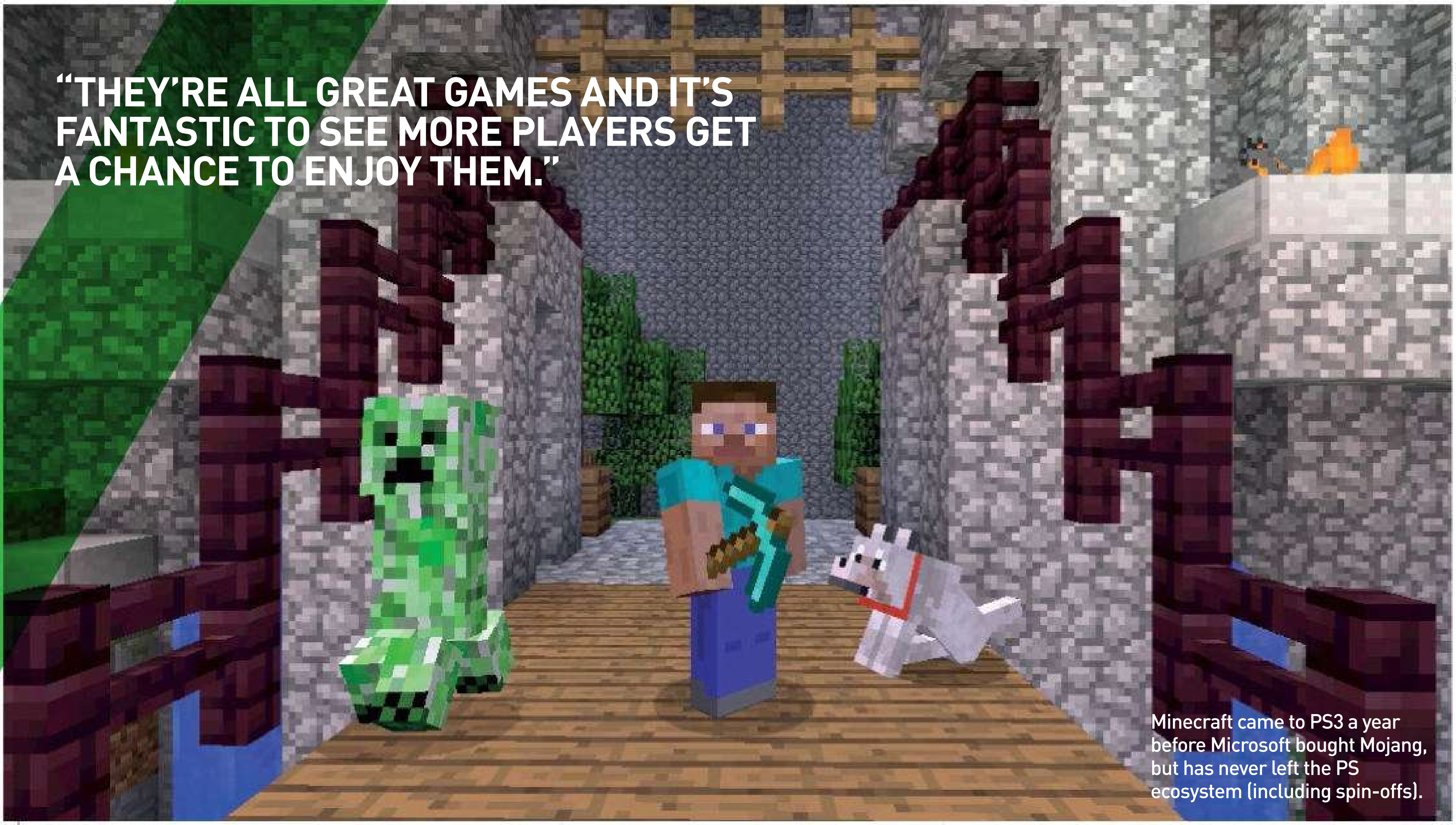
"SEA OF THIEVES AND GROUNDED ARE BOTH ONLINE GAMES THAT CAN ONLY BENEFIT FROM MORE PLAYERS."

But none of that's the case for these four, which have been Xbox exclusives since they were released, with no hint that would ever change. Until now. Talking about this move as more of an experiment, head of Xbox Phil Spencer calls it "not a change to our […] fundamental exclusive strategy." However, like all experiments, by its nature it *will* inform the future. Especially as right after saying this during the announcement, Spencer stated he has "a fundamental belief that over the next five or ten years, exclusive games – games that are exclusive to one piece of hardware – are going to be a smaller and smaller part of the games industry."

CONSOLE WARS

The messaging is a tad muddled, though it's easy to see why. Spencer is in the tough position of having to reassure Xbox fans while also bigging up this multi-platform move as a valid growth strategy to keep investors happy. As far as Xbox console warriors go, there's been a lot of displeasure online – many wondering why they bought their Xboxes in the first place. While Spencer has specifically mentioned that we shouldn't expect to see Starfield or Indiana Jones And The Great Circle move from the green to the blue, it's hard to believe they're completely off the table. With the current four titles being a bit of an experiment, it feels like it's more of a 'not yet' rather than a 'never'. We'll wait and see.

Rumours aside, it's easy to see why these four games were chosen. Rare's Sea Of Thieves and Obsidian Entertainment's Grounded are both online games that can only benefit from more players logging in to keep the action going. Tango Gameworks' Hi-Fi Rush and Pentiment (another Obsidian title), meanwhile, were both critical successes but smaller, left-field entries from their studios (the former is better known for horror like The Evil Within, while the latter »



"THEY'RE ALL GREAT GAMES AND IT'S FANTASTIC TO SEE MORE PLAYERS GET A CHANCE TO ENJOY THEM."

Minecraft came to PS3 a year before Microsoft bought Mojang, but has never left the PS ecosystem (including spin-offs).

develops RPGs like The Outer Worlds and Pillars Of Eternity). There's little reason not to get these in front of more players to better capitalise on the investment making them. With Xbox's first-party games coming to Game Pass on launch day, there's little incentive for people to buy them outright, making for a strange marketplace. They're all great games, and it's fantastic to see more players get a chance to enjoy them.

HARD(WARE) TIMES

Xbox has said it's not about to exit the hardware market any time soon, but it does make you wonder about the state of the console market for all major players. Both PlayStation and Xbox have invested further in PC ports in addition to streaming technology accessible on devices other than consoles. While the current generation of consoles hasn't sold badly, the growth compared to last generation hasn't been substantial; there are, after all, only so many people you can sell consoles to.

According to Spencer, this is the reason for the multi-platform experiment, as well as the push to get Xbox onto more screens beside those attached to the company's hefty boxes (and this is the case for PlayStation too). "There's really two choices on how you grow the industry," Spencer explained during the announcement. "Do you say, 'I have a fixed number of players, the players that we have today, and do I find new ways to monetise those players to get more money from the players that I have?' Or do you think about, 'How do I expand the business I have by finding new players and adding those to the base of players that already play?'"

Growing an audience is tricky, as is getting a constant stream of income from live service games (with many more flops than successes – launching into the genre is a massive gamble). Yet game development is largely simply getting more

RELEASE RADAR

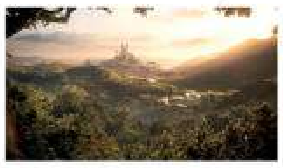
Pinging the possibility of these upcoming releases coming to PS5

LEAST LIKELY — MOST LIKELY

PHIL SPENC-NAH

INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

The broad appeal of Indy would make this licensed first-person adventure from MachineGames great for all audiences, but Phil Spencer, head of Xbox, has distanced it in particular from multi-plat rumours. Though at one time, any Xbox exclusives coming to PS5 would've seemed odd, so who can really say?



JUST A FABLE?

FABLE

Honestly, given it's been 14 years since the last Fable was released and at least one spinoff has been cancelled in that time, it's still a struggle to imagine Fable 4 being released on either Xbox or PlayStation. The CG trailers look pretty, though gameplay snippets have been sparse. Either way, no Fable games have ever come to PlayStation.

A CHANCE IN HELL

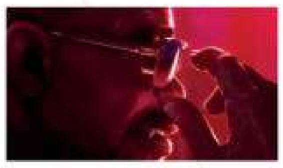
SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

There's something prestigious about the first Hellblade. It's a bit of a critical darling. Fortunately, Hellblade 2 looks to be cast in the same mould, sticking to being a shorter, focussed experience – which also means it won't have the broad appeal to shift loads of Xboxes. A later port to PS5 to mop up more sales feels likely.

A-LIKELY

AVOWED

We've already got Obsidian's Pentiment on PS5 (p54), so why not keep the games from the purveyor of excellent storytelling coming? This first-person RPG from the Fallout: New Vegas studio is full of creative, magical combat and strange, fungal lands. Perhaps this is just wishful divination, but we can see this getting a later PS5 port.



BITING CHANCE

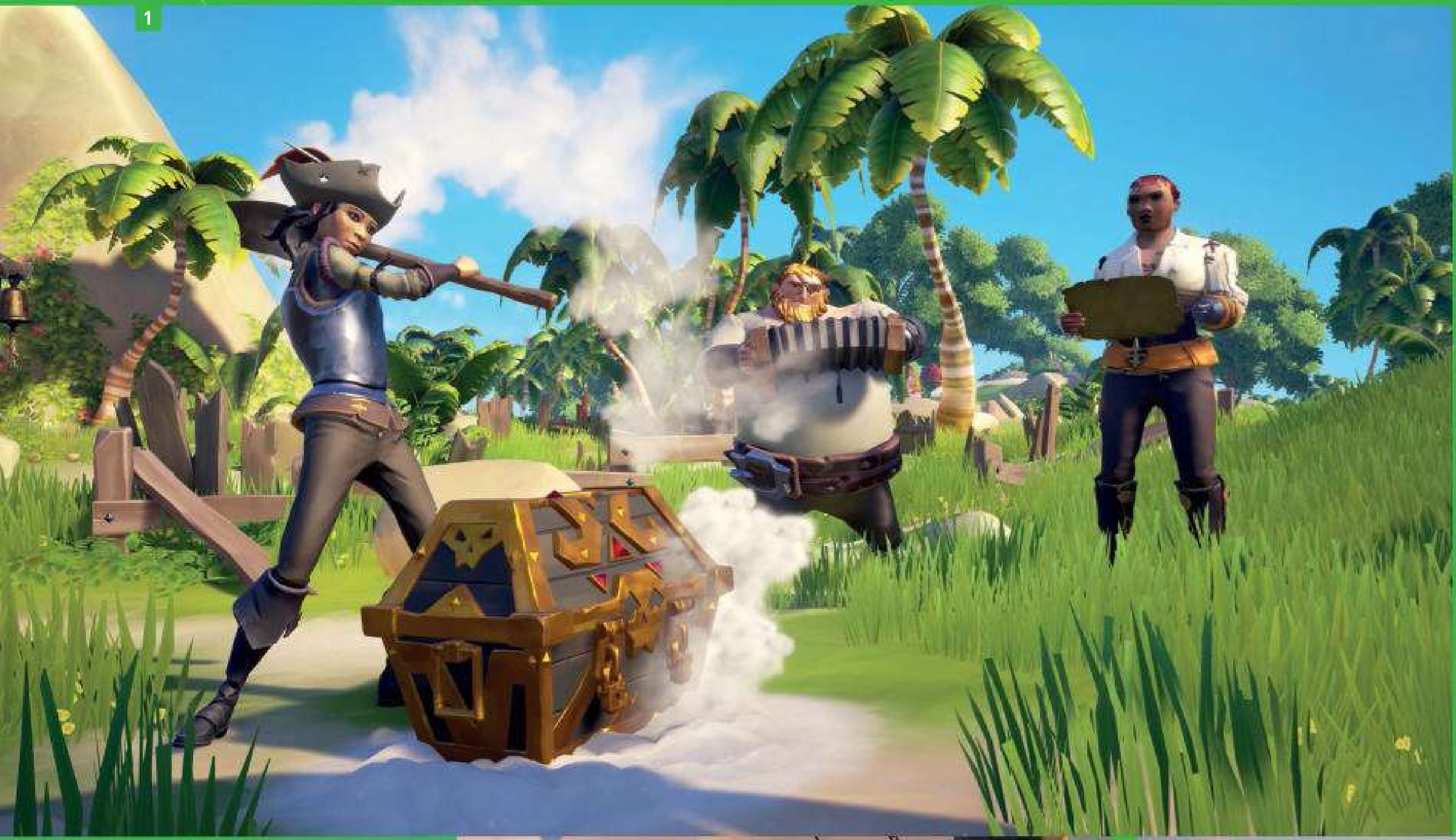
MARVEL'S BLADE

Given PlayStation's exclusive Spider-Man games, would Xbox give up its own hero? We hope so, as the prospect of a Blade game from Arkane Lyon has us more stoked than staked. Even before Xbox's multi-plat push was announced, Bethesda was noticeably schtum about calling Blade an Xbox exclusive. Something's up.

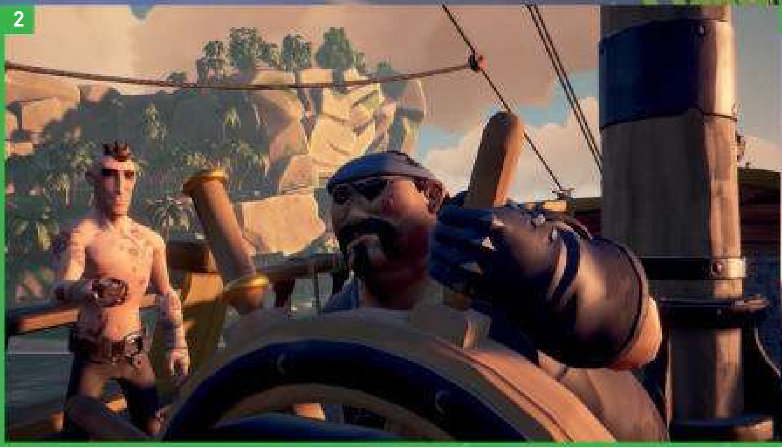
NEXT IN LINE OF DUTY

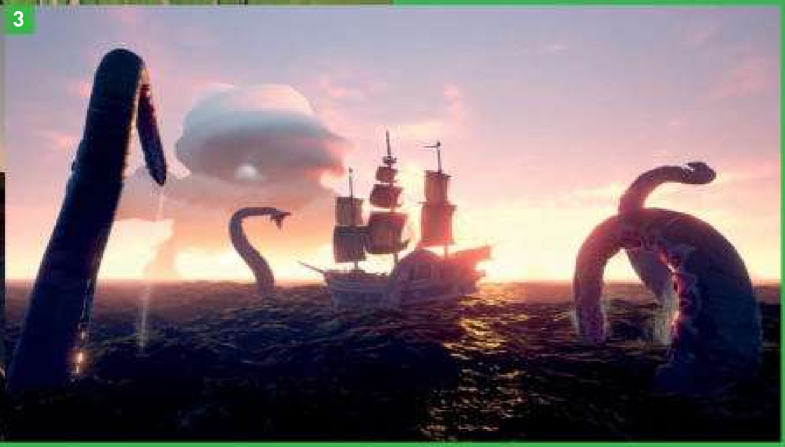
CALL OF DUTY

This one isn't sneaking up on us (like in the above screen from Modern Warfare III). When buying Activision-Blizzard (right before laying off loads of staff – grim) Microsoft made the commitment that COD would stay multi-platform. Whatever the next one is, it's coming, and will hopefully be better than last year's disappointing entry.



1 Unique art direction gives everything a heavy-handedly-hewn-from-clay feel, making for some impressively gnarly looking pirates. **2** Safer Seas removes the chaos of other people, without skimping on the excitement of setting sail. **3** Sea changes can be rapid, from would-be foes becoming unlikely allies on the High Seas to a kraken waving hello with disastrous, wide-rippling consequences.





SEA OF THIEVES

Calling all landlubbers

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 30 APR **PUB** MICROSOFT CORPORATION **DEV** RARE **PLAYERS** ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

So here we are at the helm, feeling a bit intimidated by the prospect of finally diving into this ocean of possibility. After all, it's hard to avoid feeling a wee bit of trepidation when so many buccaneers have been at this game for many seasons already. To ease us into this great big tub of skulduggery, we dip a toe into Safer Seas, a mode that allows you to sail solo or alongside three other trusted chums completely removed from the chaos of other pirates on the High Seas.

In Safer Seas, we have a whale of a time getting acquainted with our very own sloop. Sailing is not a simple case of 'set a course and forget it,' instead being a delightfully involved mechanical process, from weighing anchor and casting sails to watching the waves and ensuring your vessel maintains an even keel.

DOWN WITH THE SHIP

Land ahoy! Time-worn maps suggest there may be booty about. All right, there's just the matter of mooring the ship . Alas, we react too slowly and crash upon the beach, splintering wood heralding our arrival. After a spot of emergency repairs (and bailing out the water that has leaked inside), we explore the island in earnest – only to be beset by ghosts and skeletons. Back to the ship!

Peering down the cracked scope of our hunting rifle, we manage to pick off a few of the spectral blighters. Our plan is to make a daring bid to haul the treasure aboard, and then get out of there sharpish. Fools that we are, we're counting our little Fabergé eggs before they've hatched.

It turns out that skeletons don't much care for being shot in the head, nor does it put them down for good, and so they give chase across the waves. Already out of our minds on grog, we're sluggish in manning the cannons – and that's when the Kraken rears its heinous tentacles. Our captain takes the helm, decisively reaches into her coat, and pulls out a hurdy-gurdy to serenade the ship and its unfortunate crew as watery misadventure claims us all.

IMPRESSIONS

A fantastic little sandbox fit to bursting with story hooks for your own adventures. Perhaps you'll even manage to stay afloat longer than we did...

expensive. Unsustainable. The game industry suffered a historic amount of layoffs in 2023, with almost as many this year already – concerning given we're only a quarter of the way through. Xbox itself just laid off 1,900 employees, while PlayStation let 900 go (the planned sad closure of the historic London Studio among them).

Forget how to make exclusives work; how do you make blockbuster games work at all? Marvel's Spider-Man 2 was a tremendous success – PlayStation's fastest-selling game ever – yet developer Insomniac Games was still affected by the recent layoffs. And how do those who remain at cut-back studios continue to do best-in-class creative work while juggling slashed budgets, survivor's guilt, and dealing with the fear that their roles will get axed in a job market that's worse than it's ever been? With less money to invest, even indie studios are feeling the pinch – it's coming at both ends.

1 The just released MLB The Show 24 came to Xbox, despite being developed by Sony San Diego Studio. A rarity for PlayStation, but it makes sense for a sports game. **2** Excellent mind-hopping platformer Psychonauts 2 was released on PS4 right after developer Double Fine was bought by Microsoft, though this could be why no PS5-native version of the game came out.

DOOM, GLOOM, BLOOM?

That's a lot of bad news to chew on, but it helps put the decisions of the big two console manufacturers in more context. For Xbox, getting its games in the hands of more players makes an awful lot of sense. For PlayStation, if it's to continue to offer some of the best single-player blockbuster experiences possible, it needs to figure out how to make that sustainable. It does mean PS5 continues to be a superb place to play, and thanks to Xbox, it's better than ever with even more games.

Hi-Fi Rush. Sea Of Thieves. Grounded. Pentiment. The four games. An interesting selection. But in deliberately eschewing its biggest blockbusters (like the disappointing Starfield – though the precedent has now been set), Xbox has highlighted some of the best the industry has to offer. These are all odd games. Experimental. Oozing creativity. And ones you should definitely play.

They're a reminder that if you look past the titanic corporations flinging bags of money around, gaming's real heart is great creatives making experiences to delight and entertain. Play games like this, celebrate them, lift them up – and that goes doubly for games made without investment money from massive companies. Support the creators you love, and keep a good thing going.

But for now, let's get stuck into some new games, shall we? A historic moment for Xbox and PlayStation or not, there's no better feeling than getting to play a new game… ■

THE BACK CATALOGUE

Could these Xbox releases make the jump?

STARFIELD

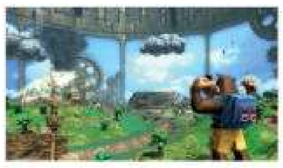
Frankly, we didn't like Bethesda's space adventure as much as its other RPGs – it felt spread way too thin. But what wasn't sparse was its massive budget. Because it's been on Game Pass since launch, how well it's performed is tricky to pin down. As much as Phil Spencer denies it, Starfield becoming available for more to buy would give it a shot in the arm.

REDFALL

Even we PlayStation-heads couldn't avoid seeing the neck hit the fang when this launched. Arkane's co-op vampire hunter was criticised for its buggy gameplay and repetitive missions. But with promised extra content yet to burst from the coffin, it's poised for a relaunch. If there's an 'Ultimate Edition' buried in the dirt, we bet it'll rise again on PS too.

HALO: INFINITE

You can't think Xbox without thinking of Halo, which is what makes the weak launch of the latest such an oddity. While it's seen post-launch updates, the multiplayer could use more players. Even if Halo campaigns remain Xbox-exclusive, it'd make sense to open the online doors to cross-platform players, as is happening with Grounded and Sea Of Thieves already.



RARE REPLAY

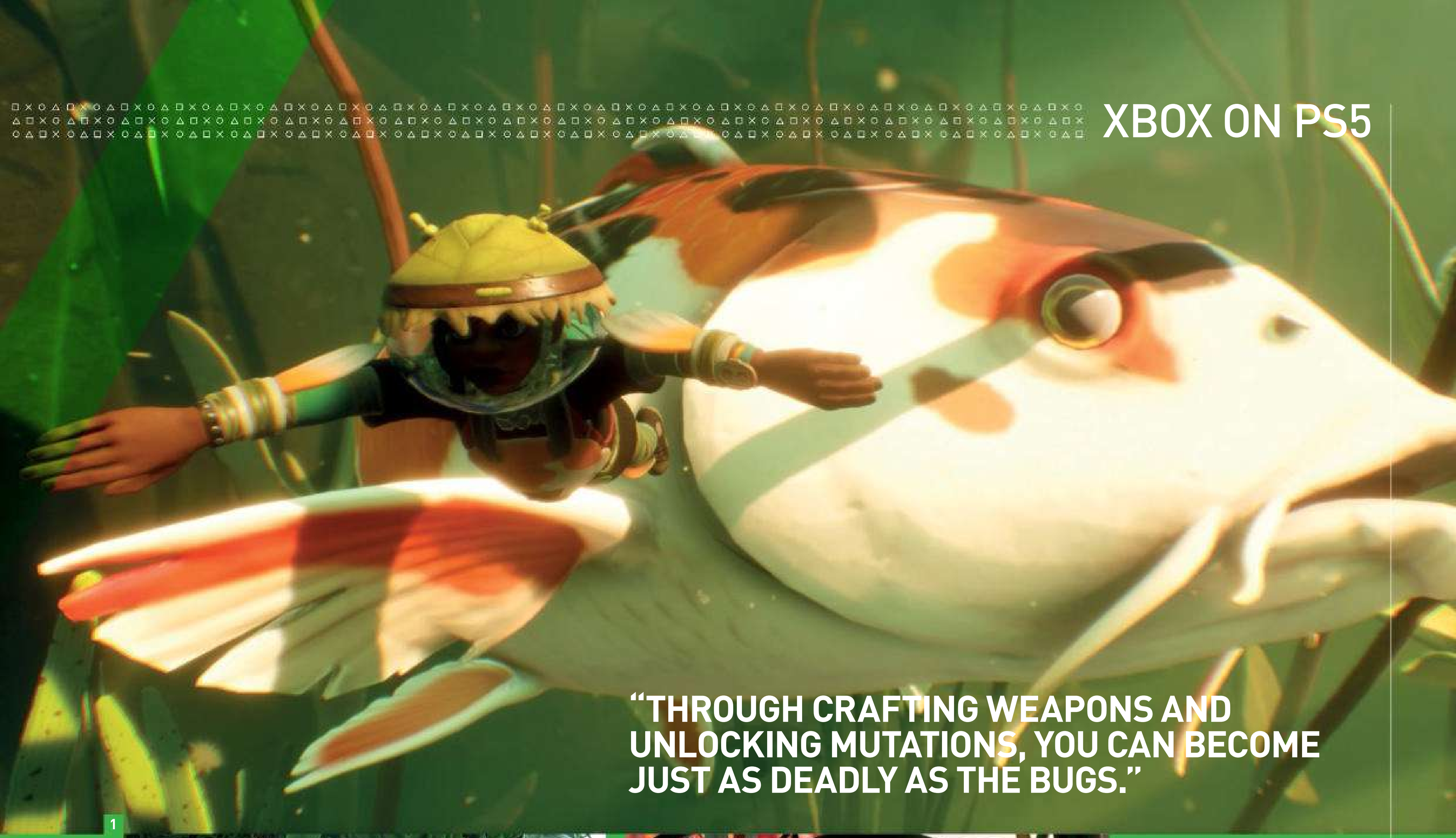
UK developer Rare is an industry legend. GoldenEye. Banjo-Kazooie. Conker. Perfect Dark. But Sea Of Thieves is the first of its games to come to PlayStation. So why stop there? A collection of (almost) all its games exists on Xbox, and many have been released on Nintendo Switch. It belongs in a museum – and why not make that a museum within PS5?

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

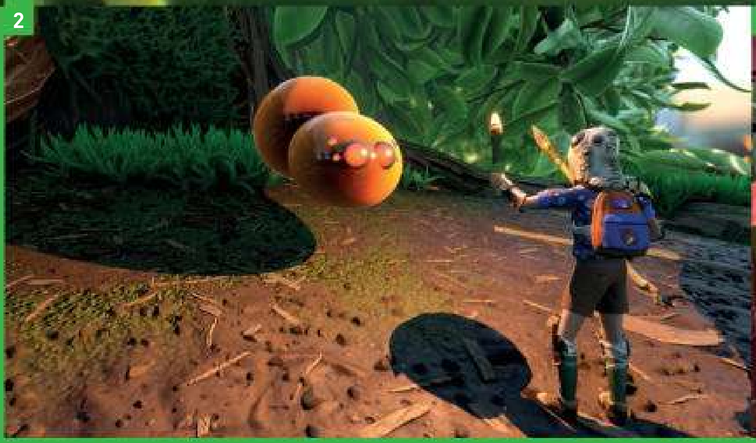
There's a precedent for this cutesy, melancholy metroidvania hopping off Xbox. It made headlines when it came to Switch in 2019, three years after its initial release (its sequel followed a year after) making Ori the poster child for going multi-platform. Moreover, this is a captivating platformer that more should play, so let's hope we see it soon!

GEARS OF WAR

Like Halo, it would be great to get even the multiplayer component of the latest Gears Of War (Gears 5) into more hands. But we hope that if Gears does come over, it does so in a big way. The first game still holds up as one of the best third-person cover shooters. Look past the meaty muscles filling the camera, and you'll find a well-crafted post-apocalypse story.



“THROUGH CRAFTING WEAPONS AND UNLOCKING MUTATIONS, YOU CAN BECOME JUST AS DEADLY AS THE BUGS.”



1 Just when you think you’re getting properly situated on land, terror lurks in the depths of the koi pond. **2** Arachnophobia safe mode is an imperfect option, but definitely one we welcome. Just don’t hug these cute spheres because they will still end you. **3** Beyond scavenging food or crafting up a storm, you can build a teeny little base of operations.

GROUNDED

Tiny teens, BIG trouble

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 16 APR **PUB** MICROSOFT CORPORATION **DEV** OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT **PLAYERS** 1-4, ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

Being a teen is tough: roasting what meat you can scavenge before it spoils, gently harvesting dew to slake your thirst, and avoiding the glassy-eyed stare of the backyard’s many apex predators. Oh, yeah, did we forget to mention the teens in our oddly specific sample have been shrunk to the size of ants?

In this survival game, you play as one of four formerly normal-sized youths – Willow, Max, Pete, and your girl Hoops – desperate to get back to more normal teen troubles. Maybe we’re dating ourselves with these film comparisons, but think A Bug’s Life meets The Borrowers by way of Honey, I Shrunk The Kids. There are mundane objects made whimsical due to a simple shift in perspective, wacky science shenanigans, and super-sized bugs aplenty.

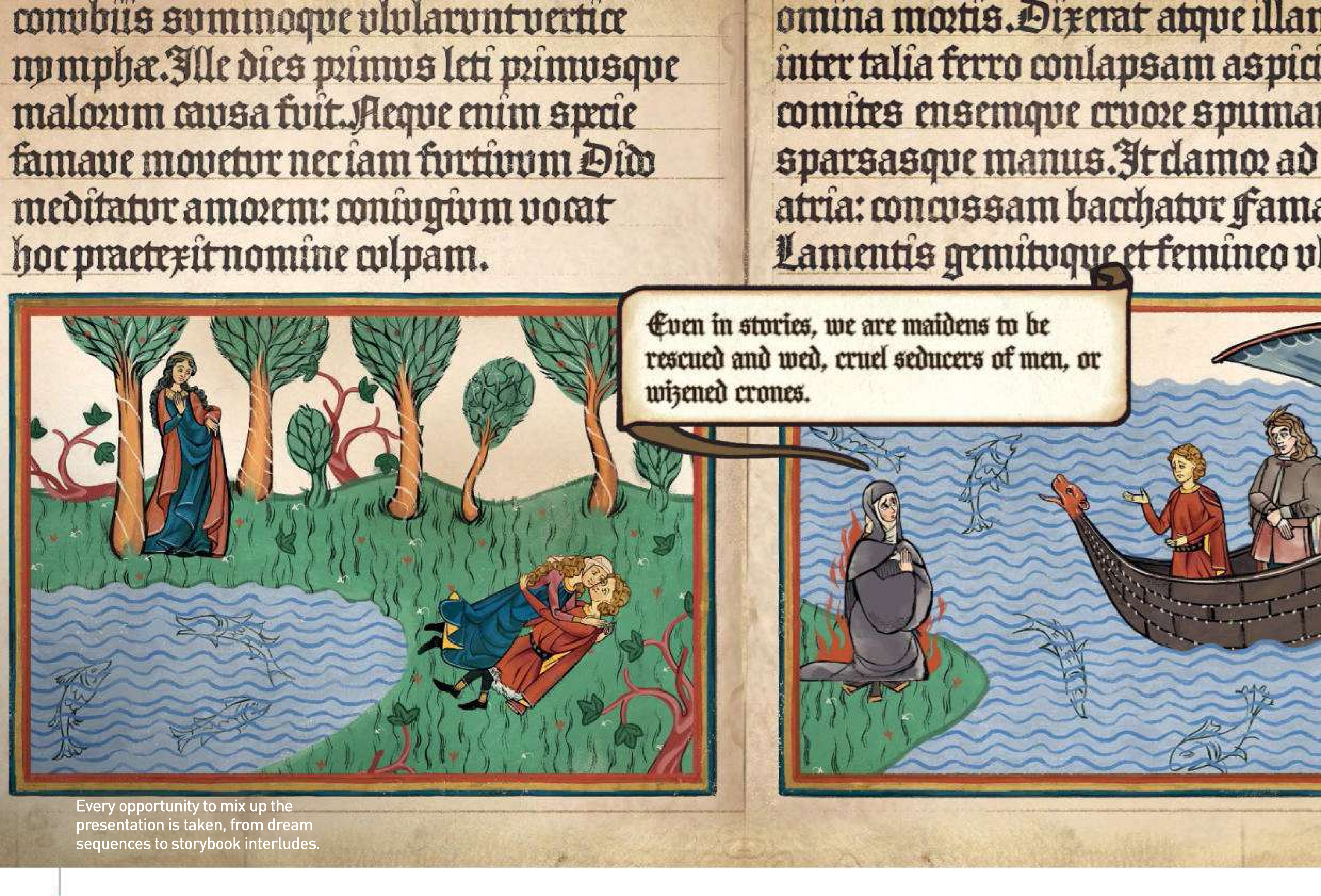
FUN SIZED

Speaking of those, sometimes seeing one sickly little house spider scurrying about is enough to ruin our day in real life, and we know we aren’t alone. As there are an awful lot of the eight-legged freaks threatening to trample you and your pals, Grounded offers a unique option for those who cannot abide these creepy crawlies: arachnophobia safe mode. Rather than entirely removing these pests from the game – along with the potential therapeutic benefits of splatting ’em – this slider changes their appearance. The higher you set the slider, the more abstract they become, removing those awful legs and mandibles until they’re little more than a kind of cute collection of fuzzy spheres… though we cannot stress enough this makes them no less deadly.

But through crafting weapons and unlocking mutations (wacky science shenanigans, remember?), you can become just as deadly. Mind you, even with only a wee pebblet axe to your name you can become a force to be reckoned with if you learn the attack patterns of the critters around you and master the art of the perfect block. Maybe one day you’ll be crafty enough to confront the real evil that lurks in the depths of the garden pond and live to tell the tale…

IMPRESSIONS

‘Immersive’ is absolutely the word for this survival game. Lushly realised with just the right amount of whimsy and danger – though the spiders can do one.


conubiis summoque ulularunt vertice
nymphæ. Ille dies primus leti primusque
malorum causa fuit. Neque enim specie
famave movetur nec iam furtivum Dido
meditatur amorem: coniugium vocat
hoc praetexit nomine culpam.
omina mortis. Dixerat atque illa
inter talia ferro conlapsam aspic
comites ensemque cruore spuma
sparsasque manus. It clamor ad
atria: concussam bacchatur Fama
Lamentis gemituque et femineo ul
Even in stories, we are maidens to be rescued and wed, cruel seducers of men, or wizened crones.

Every opportunity to mix up the presentation is taken, from dream sequences to storybook interludes.

Pentiment

Peep out the manuscript, you'll see that it's a must

Here's a historic moment: the first review of an Xbox game for a PlayStation magazine. And we don't want to get too meta, but how fitting that we're writing about a game that is itself about documenting a little piece of history. Taking place within the pages of a 16th-century book, Pentiment is a timely reminder that the printed word carries weight and meaning. Not that we expect *these* ones to be remembered in 500-odd years' time.

Here, there's a real sense of gravity to your words and deeds – and yes, you might well feel ashamed of them. As travelling artist Andreas Maler, you're working at a monastery in the Alpine town of Tassing when a visiting nobleman is murdered. When the finger of blame falls upon your ageing mentor (who's barely able to lift a quill, never mind a deadly weapon) you turn detective to get him off the hook.

MONK-Y BUSINESS

As you explore and talk to townsfolk, monks, and nuns, you'll find several suspects. But with no critical evidence, you must decide who's likely to have committed the crime – or who most deserves to be punished for it. You know that whoever you pick is unlikely to get due process (it is the early 1500s, after all) and, more importantly, that you're responsible for what happens next. Uh oh.

PS5
PENTIMENT

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB Microsoft Corporation
DEV Obsidian
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 15+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY High contrast colours; easy-read fonts; instant dialogue; adjustable text size and notification time; photosensitivity options

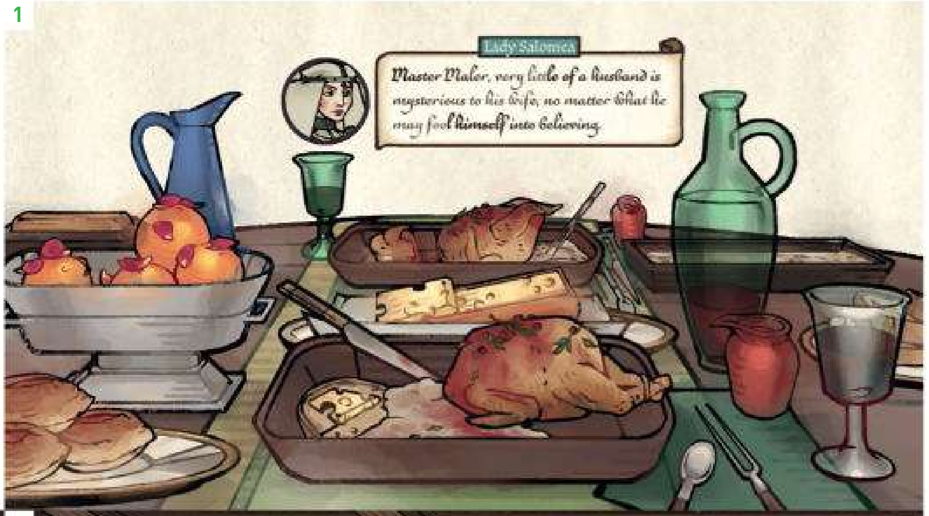
That choice feels more meaningful for the time it takes to set up. Pentiment is a slow burner, and there's a lot to take in during its chat-heavy opening – though if you're struggling to keep up with everything, you can press the touchpad to pull up info and character portraits for underlined words and names. Some might find it uneventful, but when the drama eventually ramps up, you'll be glad you had the chance to properly get to know its cast.

Andreas, too, since you get to choose his background. Was he living it large in Flanders or studying hard in Florence? Either way, your choice adds fun flavour to conversations. You might be tempted to show off your smarts, but among the peasant folk that isn't such a bright idea – if they find you too pretentious, they might clam up and refuse to talk. Elsewhere, though, your education may open doors that would otherwise have stayed closed.

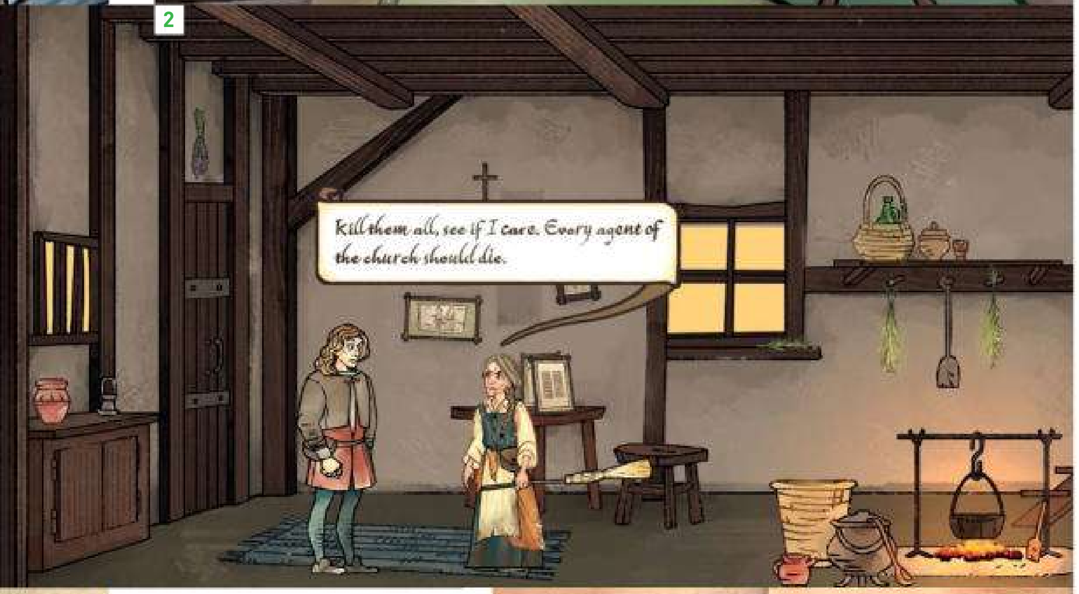
You're aware of when your choices are having an effect, since a pop-up tells you they "will be remembered". If that phrasing sounds ominous, that's partly because you're never allowed to forget that what you're doing is being inked into the very pages of history. This is how the story of Tassing will be told – so be careful what you say and do. Especially as you won't have time to do it all: as the mornings and afternoons tick by, you'll need to think

> You're never allowed to forget that what you're doing is being inked into the pages of history.

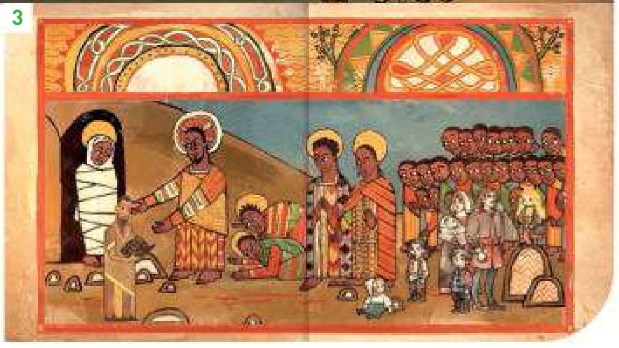
1


Lady Salomea
Master Maler, very little of a husband is mysterious to his wife, no matter what he may fool himself into believing.

2


Kill them all, see if I care. Every agent of the church should die.

3



1 Food at the table reflects the status of the people gathered around it. **2** Characters are expressive, showing surprise, disgust, and anger. **3** Ethiopian priest Brother Sebhat tells two Biblical fables illustrated in African art.

carefully about who you want to spend them with.

A WRINKLE IN TIME

That becomes even more important in Pentiment's second and third acts, where your choices, big and small, pay off. Years have passed, and so have some of the residents you met in act one, while familiar faces have gained more lines. But there's joy, too. That babbling toddler who poked you awake with a stick in the first scene? She's now a grown woman (and much more eloquent).

The clever visual touches aren't limited to those woodcut-style illustrations either. Different fonts reflect characters' social standing or role (a printer's opening line appears as upside-down letter blocks) and it's delightful to see spelling mistakes corrected after the fact (a bit like watching an early-modern Mim at work). Sound effects add to the illusion of a story being written in real time, soft scribbles becoming noisy scratches when someone coughs or yells.

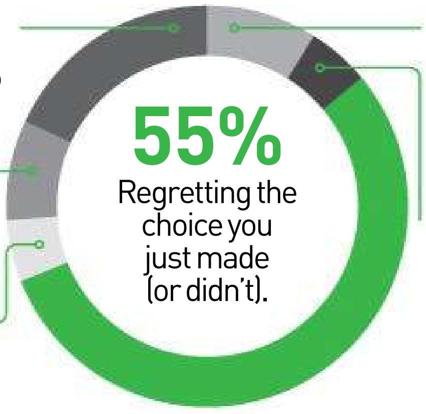
Depending on how you're wired, Pentiment wraps up with what you might see as an invitation to commit to a version of events or an opportunity to rewrite them. Yet as it makes a thoughtful point about history being an incomplete picture, it delivers a finale that feels satisfyingly conclusive. What's even clearer is that the first of surely many Xbox games to come to PlayStation is going to be a very hard act to follow.

A rich and rewarding narrative adventure with choices that really matter, Obsidian's historical saga is an unforgettable debut for Xbox on PlayStation. **Chris Schilling**

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: PENTIMENT



18% Breaking bread with the townsfolk for some juicy gossip with your grub.

8% Wishing *our* handwriting was as neat as this.

5% Playing (and probably losing) at card game Lansquenet.

55% Regretting the choice you just made (or didn't).

9% Indulging in finer dining – shall we reach for the cheese or wine first?

5% Helping out with odd jobs – we'd make a pretty decent blacksmith, you know.

HOW TO… SOLVE A MURDER

Gernot
Yes, the Baron of Rothvogel! So wonderful to have you here again... we actually did meet on your last visit.

Be thorough – though actually you won't be able to. Talk to everyone – oh, but you won't have time. Consider every possible angle – but you'll only have a limited perspective. Don't worry – actually, this one works. Pentiment's purposeful limitations make for a better story.

STATPACK

05 Different backgrounds for Andreas. You can also pick between three Master's degrees and two of five other fields of study.

27 That's how many more years pass between the game's first and final acts. Don't worry, that's not in real time, and there are two time skips.

506 Years ago is when Pentiment's story begins. That's 1518, if you'd rather not do the maths – the same year as Strasbourg's 'dancing plague'.

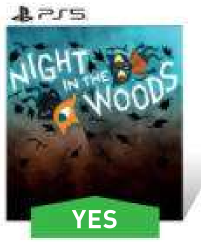
LOVING/HATING

POPULAR FICTION
It's refreshing to see a grounded portrait of ordinary people's lives in historical fiction, particularly in videogames.

READ FLAG
There's nothing to outright *hate*, but Pentiment's script is occasionally overly keen to show how well-researched it is.

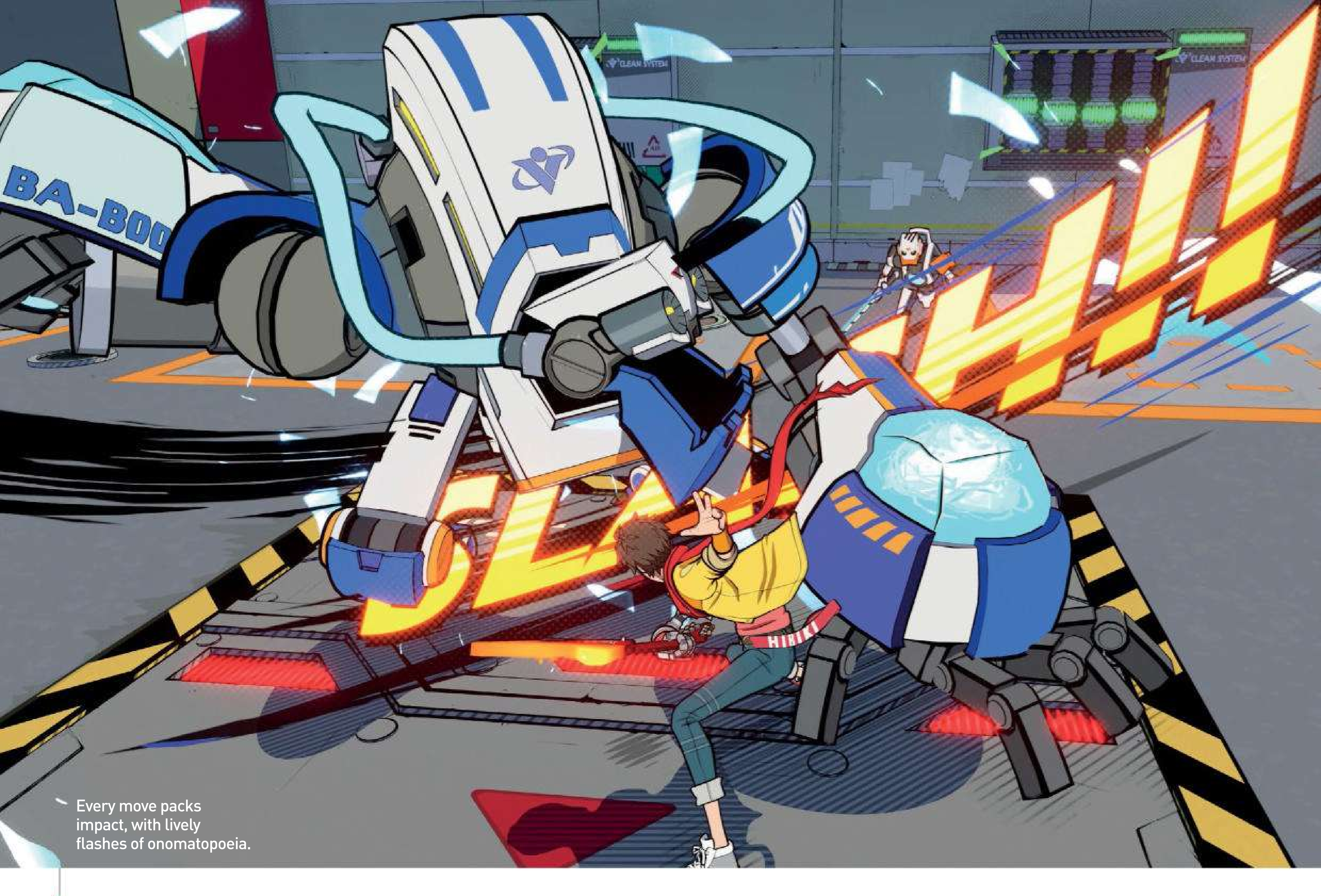
IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES
Wayward Strand also makes a virtue of time constraints but its story isn't quite as gripping.



YES
Night In The Woods was an inspiration for Pentiment, though its ending is undoubtedly weaker.

YES
The Forgotten City also has drama and historical heft, but a few technical shortcomings, too.



Every move packs impact, with lively flashes of onomatopoeia.

Hi-Fi Rush

Teriffic, jamtastic, and melodious character action

Every good character action game has rhythmic gameplay at its heart. Input slashes for Dante's big sword in Devil May Cry with specific timings, for instance, and he'll perform different combos. But what if the effects went beyond solo performances and every aspect of the game became a pitch-perfect rock orchestra? That's Hi-Fi Rush.

Armed with an, erm, robot arm, and an electric guitar he can form at will from nearby scrap, Chai's ready to take Vandelay Industries to task. Due to a screw-up with the experimental procedure that restored the use of his arm, he's been labelled a 'defect', and is being hunted by the mega-corp's robot security through the city-sized factory.

The issue? Chai's MP3 player was thrown into the machine, and inserted within his chest. As he's a budding rock star (which is why he wanted a new arm in the first place), it's a device loaded with serious tunes. Thanks to it he has an almost preternatural ability to feel the rhythm of the world around him – handy when leaping around conveyor belts and flipping platforms, and bashing to the beat gives him a damage bonus.

CHAI SPLATTÉ

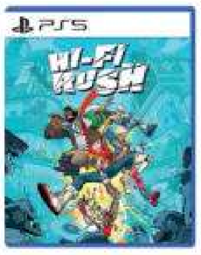
Chai's not the only one with some suspicions about the robotics company, and so he quickly joins up with the tech-savvy Peppermint and her robo-kitty 808 to investigate the truth behind Project Armstrong.

Everything you bash within each level moves to the backing track, meaning different stages have their own BPMs. Constantly animated, there's always some element of the stage on the move, whether it's for a practical reason such as to guide your jumps or simply trees swaying in time or the hefty clockwork cogs within a museum twisting away. Just as animated are the characters, who hit key poses with anime-like glee and take part in some of the most chortle-worthy slapstick we've seen this generation. Thanks to a gorgeous in-action cel-shaded look, the line between cutscenes and gameplay is completely blurred. Few games have such visual flair, and we know this will look just as good in ten years' time.

That sense of humour continues through to the world, which is populated by working-class robots who often have something to grumble about. Chai's a solid fighter, but not the brightest tool in the shed, leading to plenty of comic farce. One boss, who presides over a sector of Vandelay Industries, has to be defeated by goading him into running down the game's own development budget, culminating in a lava-filled challenge.

LONELY BOY

In scraps, Hi-Fi Rush shines; combat's full of pizzazz thanks to how every element is based



INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £27.99
ETA Out now
PUB Bethesda Softworks
DEV Tango Gameworks
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 12-13 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable subtitles and font size; colourblind mode; auto-action mode; easy mode; multiple rhythm visualisation modes; auto-parry; rhythm game assists, adjustable camera sensitivity; togglable motion blur and camera shake

> Everything within a level moves to the backing track, so different stages have their own BPMs.

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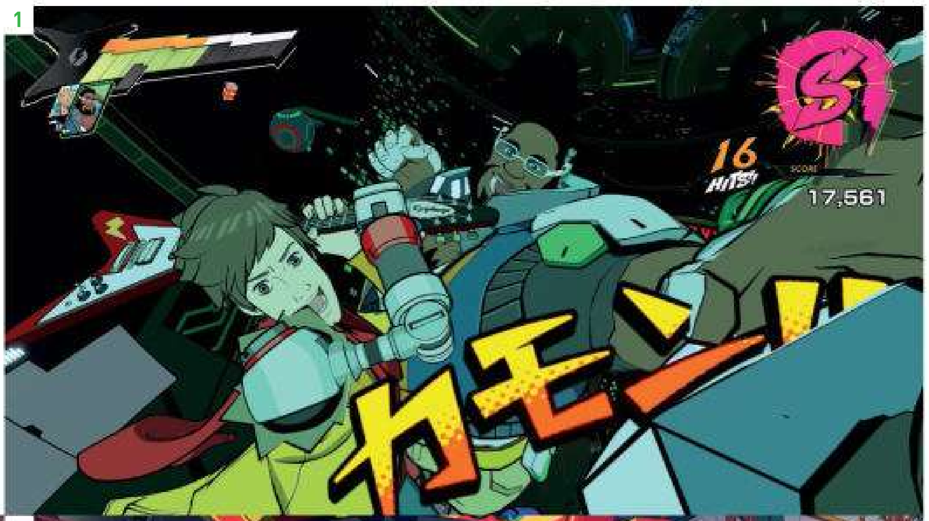

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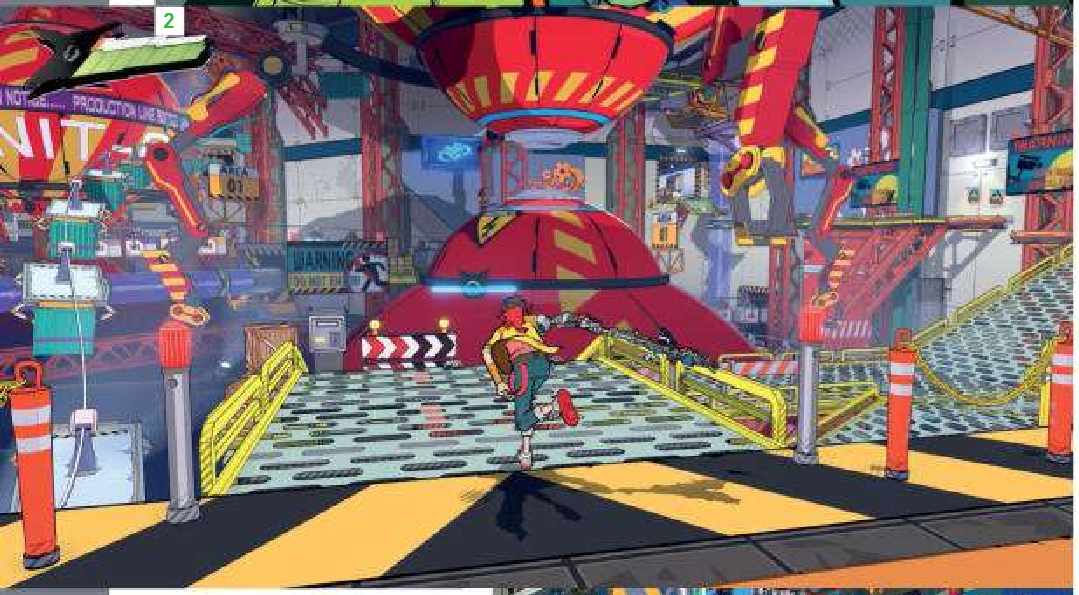

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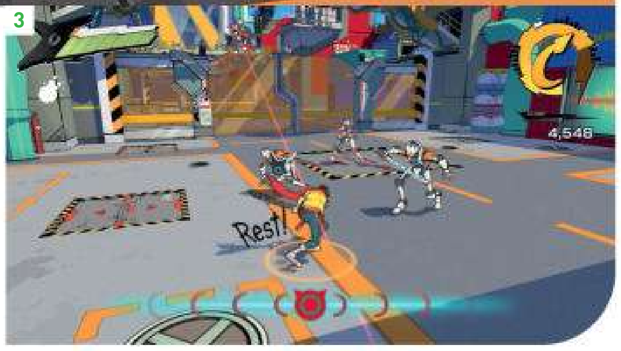


1 Call in an ally with great timing and you'll pull off a more powerful move. 2 There's a lot of running and jumping through colourful, constantly-on-beat levels. 3 Hit the touch pad at enemy time to bring up a metronome.

around the rhythmic design. Light attacks take up one beat, while heavy attacks take up two, with combo finishers displaying a timing circle with which you can deploy a stronger blast from Chai or even a teammate. These team moves, such as dispatching shields with Peppermint's lasers, are required to defeat some enemy types, which can sometimes grate when you're waiting for a cooldown.

Chances to parry are wonderfully telegraphed as well, robot foes whirring out a beat of simple 1-2s, 1-2-3s, and the like for you to tap your way through, opening them up to take even bigger damage. Boss fights, naturally, turn it up to 11 with larger-than-life battles, and even licensed music to score them (including The Prodigy, Nine Inch Nails, The Joy Formidable, and more), though the original tracks are nothing to sniff at. 808 in orb form pulses with every beat, while Chai snaps his fingers every other, and the whole world beats in rhythm, aiding your input. (Though there's not much punishment for being off-time, Chai can only attack as fast as the beat allows).

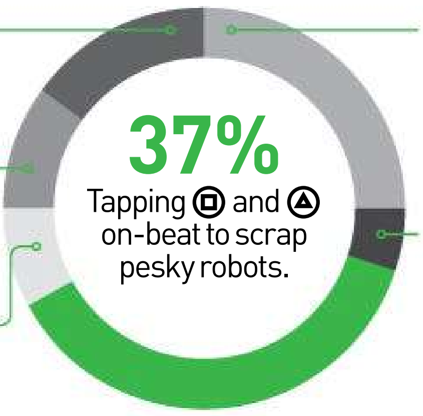
There's too much tendency for long lab hallways and slow-paced platforming, especially mid-game, but you're never far off a perfect needle drop drawing you back in (that Inazawa Chainsaw moment!). This is a melodically original action game, and with an Arcade Challenge and plenty of reason to master levels, this is a tune we'll keep humming.

The most original character action in years. Bold, vibrant animation mixes wonderfully with timing-based combat and a truly charming story. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: HI-FI RUSH



37% Tapping □ and △ on-beat to scrap pesky robots.

15% Feeling self-conscious of a 55% timing score for a battle.

10% Deciding between combos to buy – we just want them all right away!

8% Enraptured by the animations, enjoying funny cutscenes.

25% Doing maybe a bit too much running and jumping across timed platforms.

5% Finding a secret door, but being unable to open it until you replay the level.

HOW TO… UPGRADE CHAI

In classic character action fashion, meter upgrades are hidden throughout levels, so you're best off using money early on to expand your combos for more options in a scrap. Given how busy fights can get, we recommend capitalising early on air combos. Stay high!

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

DUALSENSE SPEAKER
"Groovy!", "Excellent!" and the like ring out when you nab upgrades, and you hear "Fight!" before a scrap

HAPTIC FEEDBACK
Things in cutscenes and on-time whacks can be felt via some creative vibrations.

LOVING/HATING

ANIMATED ACTION
Ridiculously colourful, all the animation flourishes are a joy to behold, cannily mixing framerates to highlight motion and poses.

ACCENT CORE
We love the characters Chai befriends, but attempts at British accents are iffy at best. Is Korsica really meant to be Scottish?

TROPHY CABINET

WHOA! THERE'S ANOTHER HEALTH BAR!?

BRONZE
Increase your health enough to nab another meter. That'll certainly come in handy.

DIDN'T SKIP A BEAT

SILVER
Beat the game to unlock and clear Rhythm Master difficulty. Not easy!

WHAT A JOURNEY IT WAS...

GOLD
Complete the Wall Of Fame by completing so, so many challenges.

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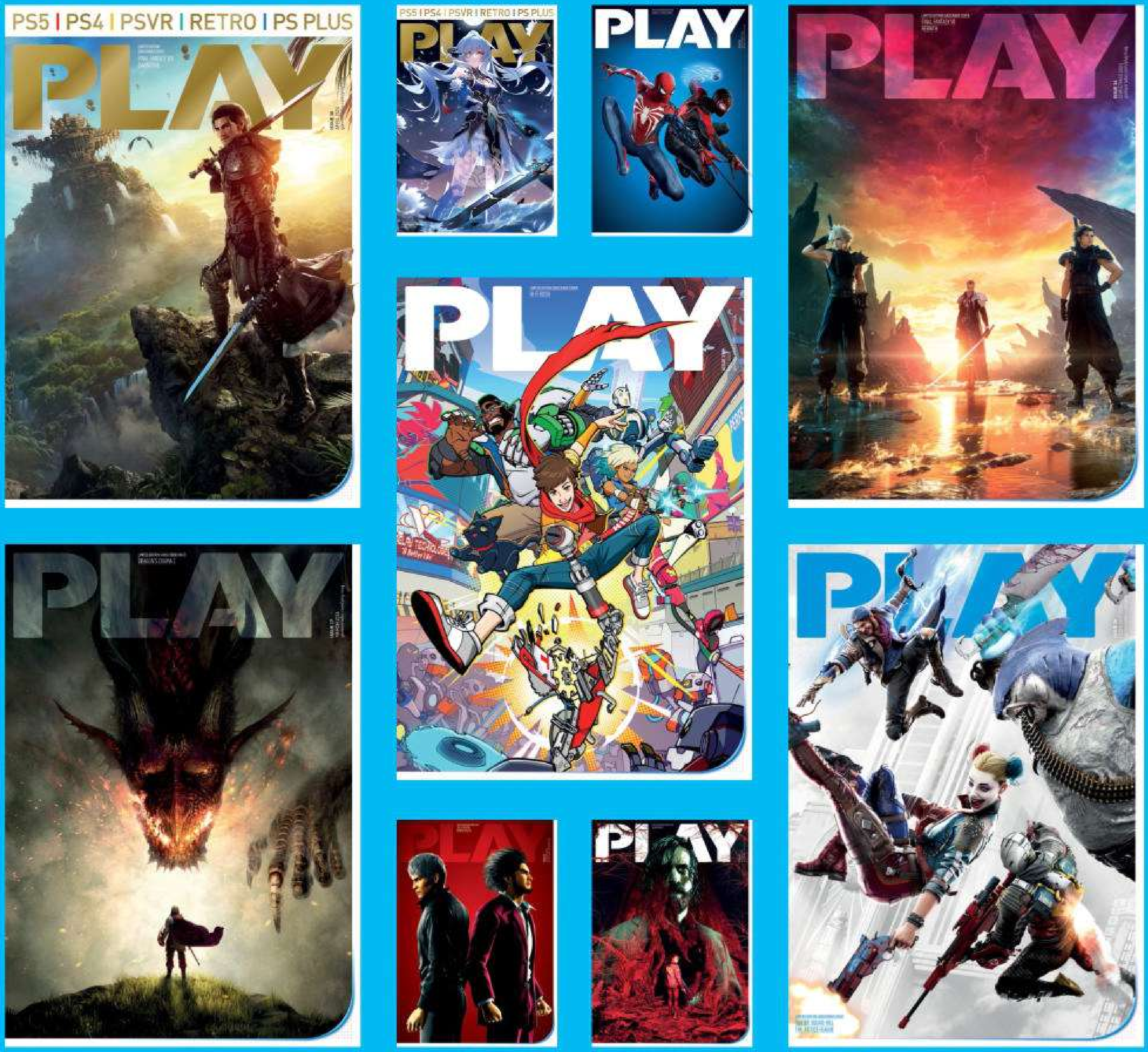
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BREAKING THE CYCLE

With **In Stars And Time** launched, developer Adrienne Bazir talks to Rachel Watts about their time-looping RPG

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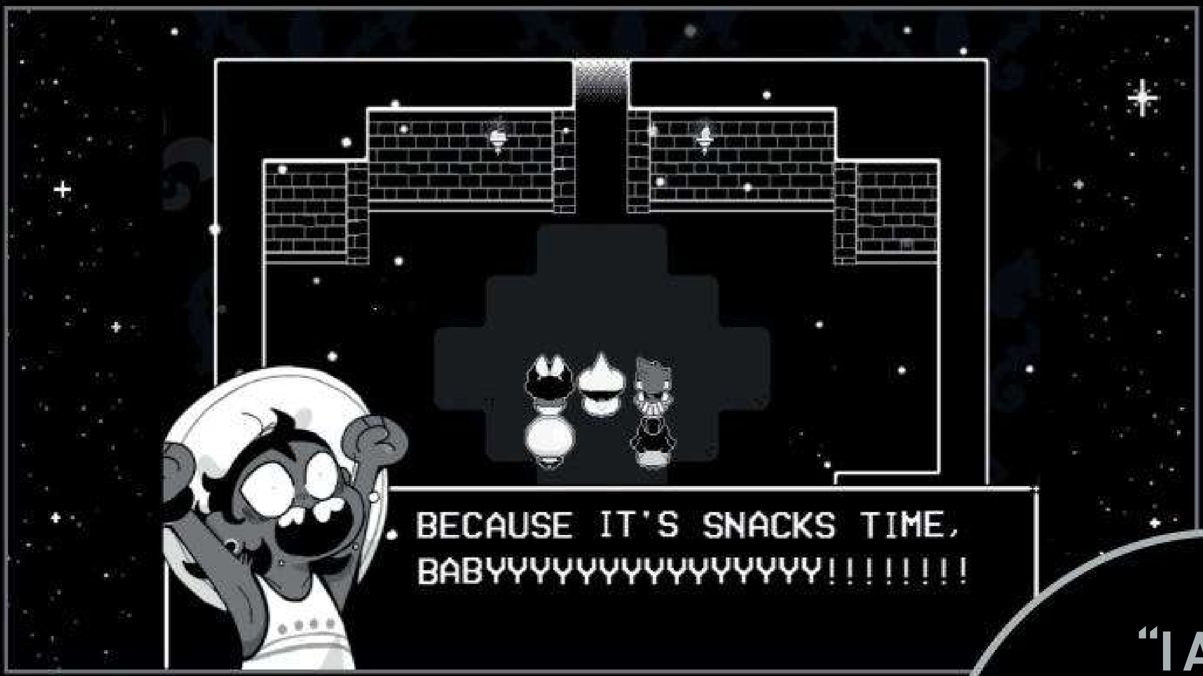
Some of the best stories in videogames feature time loops. Two critically acclaimed PlayStation standouts that come immediately to mind are deadly assassin sim Deathloop and existential space exploration adventure The Outer Wilds, but if we widen the scope beyond narrative you can find a loop in most games. Many obvious ones, including bullet-fuelled action game Returnal and underworld hack-and-slasher Hades, fall within the roguelike genre, where looping is a staple. Playing hundreds of matches in the same handful of maps in your chosen multiplayer FPS is its own kind of loop – and heck, getting your butt repeatedly kicked by a brutal boss encounter can *feel* like you're stuck in a never-ending loop.



Snack time is the best time. We're always happy to loop back to snacks.

To play games is to take part in some sort of loop, whether it's simply a recurring plot point in a story or an inherent aspect of a genre. A handful of developers have deliberately messed with this idea in their games, but one of the best iterations is the excellent In Stars And Time, an RPG in which a character in an adventuring party realises they're stuck in an apparently neverending time loop. What's special about In Stars And Time is that its looping serves multiple purposes: it helps to tell an emotional story and works as a smart game mechanic, and on top of that the loop is used as a thoughtful commentary on the way we play games and engage with their systems. That's no small feat!

This self-awareness was a core idea from the very beginning. Solo developer Adrienne Bazir says they always wanted In Stars And Time to contain some element of introspection, and to reflect on games as a medium. "The basic idea was having a videogame character being stuck in a New Game+ situation," Bazir says. "They've finished their quest but are realising that even though their journey is over, they keep restarting it again. There was an obvious connection between concepts like New Game+, game overs, and videogame 'lives' then linking it with how it would feel for a character to experience those ideas. If you had a character who was aware of all that, it would feel like experiencing a time loop."

LOOPER-DUPER

Bazir initially created In Stars And Time's story as several short webcomics which followed an unnamed character in a cloak and pointy hat experiencing a time loop as they fought through a fantasy castle. They toyed with the idea of turning the idea into a visual novel but it quickly became apparent that In Stars And Time was destined to be an RPG. "The prophecy about repeating everything again, the character designs, fighting through a big castle – all of those things were already in the comic, so I felt like it had to be an RPG," Bazir says. After developing a one- to two-hour prototype titled Start Again: Prologue, they decided there was potential for a bigger game. "The prototype ended up being Start Again: Prologue, but I also realised very quickly as I was making my notes, even from the first week, this is gonna get a lot bigger."

During the development of Start Again: Prologue and subsequently In Stars And Time, the pointy-hatted protagonist got a name (Siffrin) and was joined by a classic RPG adventuring party. The story follows the group as they fight through a castle on a quest to defeat the big bad king and save the kingdom. Siffrin is loosely the 'rogue' of the group, and after accidentally activating a trap that causes a giant boulder to crush them, they discover they're caught in a time loop. There's a rock-paper-scissors-style magic system, a lore-stuffed fantasy world, and enough puns to impress a PLAY magazine editor [*Agreed* – ed]. But the core of the story explores the consequences that Siffrin must face while having to experience the same day over and over again.

> "I ALSO REALISED […] AS I WAS MAKING MY NOTES, EVEN FROM THE FIRST WEEK, THIS IS GONNA GET A LOT BIGGER."

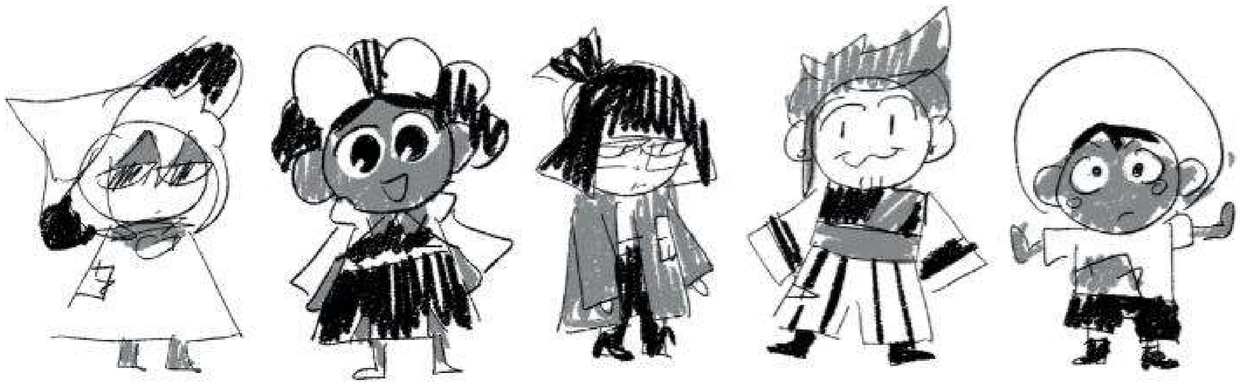
In In Stars And Time, looping isn't seen as a failure. Sure, sometimes you're forced to loop – by dying in a fight, for example – but there'll also be times when you'll want to loop for other purposes. The castle is filled not only with enemies but puzzles too, and untangling all of its secrets will mean looping back as many times as it takes to reveal them all. It also gives you plenty of opportunity to learn and absorb the lore of the game's world. (The world-building is wonderfully dense.)

Looping isn't a power that you have to submit to either. When and how you loop is, for the most part, up to you. The game quickly teaches you that you can restart a cycle by (ghoulishly) dying on purpose, and the most efficient way to do that is to touch one of the deadly 'tears' scattered around the castle. Killing your character on purpose doesn't feel great, but it's one of the quickest and easiest ways to loop. It's also important to note that when Siffrin meets their end, you can choose what point to loop back to, be it the start of the day or a certain floor of the castle, almost like a save system.

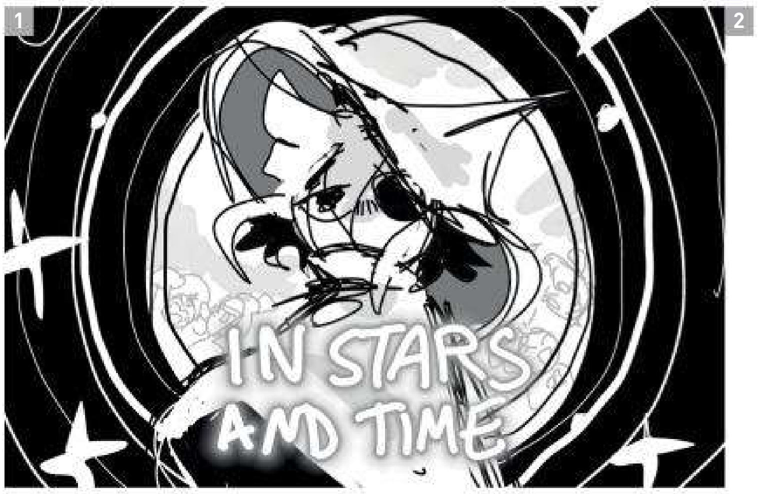
You are given a surprising amount of control over the game's looping, then, which Bazir notes has encouraged some unusual player behaviour. "They give themselves rules, it's really fascinating," they

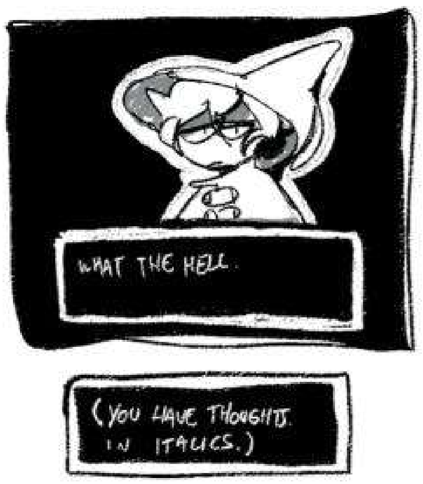
STARS OF THE SHOW

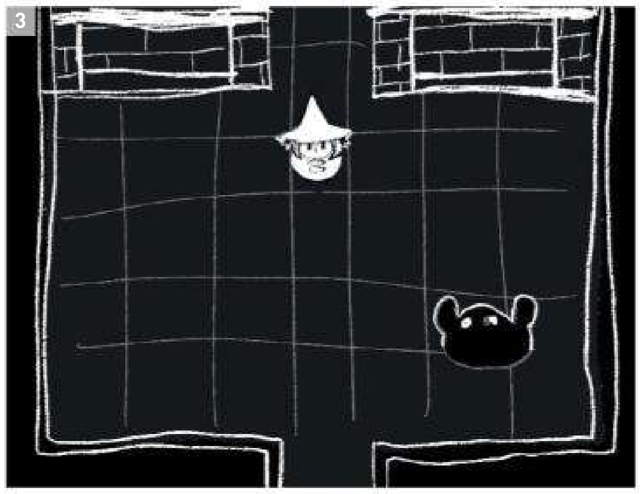
From sketches to your PlayStation, Siffrin and their adventurer pals really sparkle



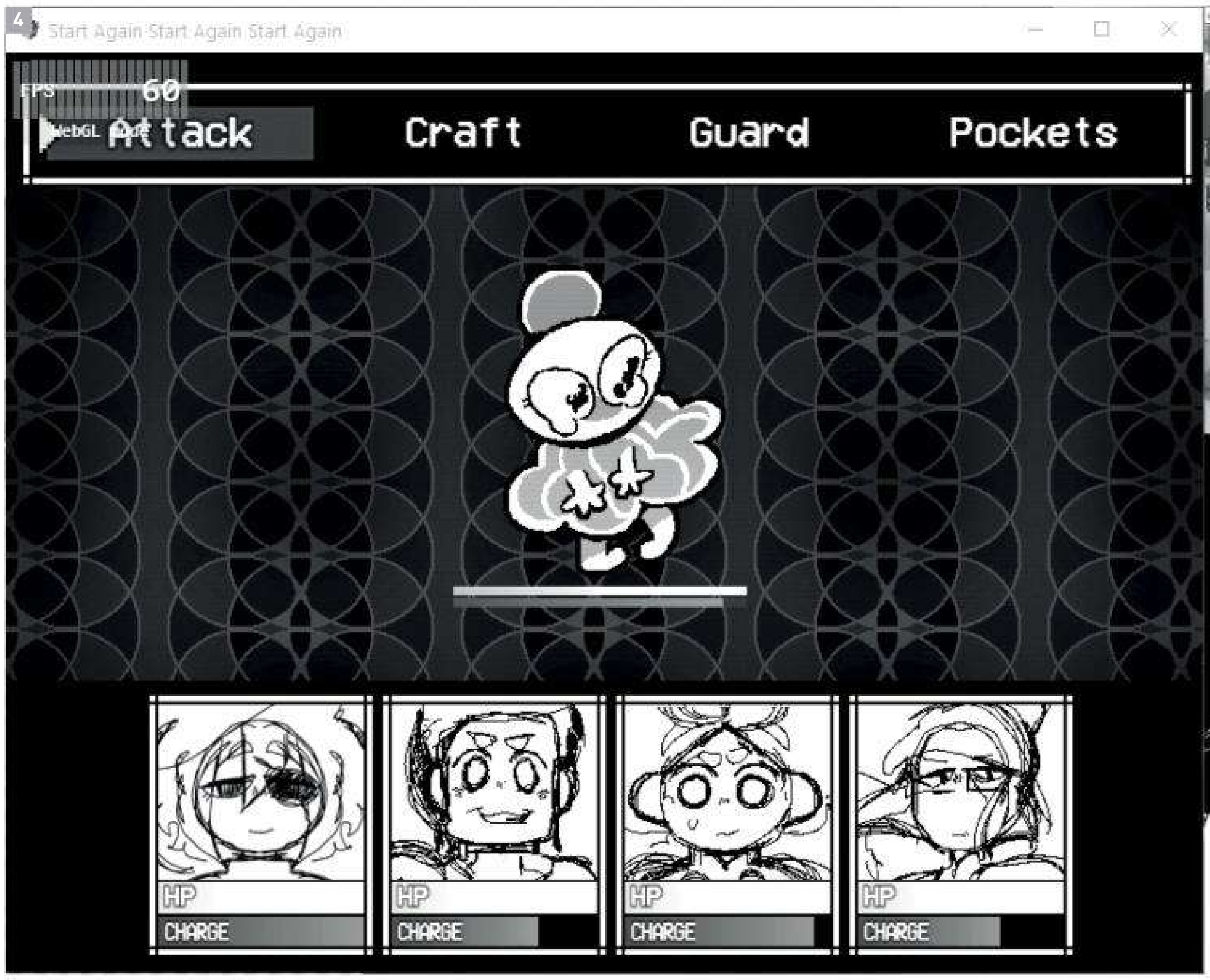
The strongest band of adventurers you've ever seen.


1
IN STARS AND TIME


2
WHAT THE HELL.
(YOU HAVE THOUGHTS IN ITALICS.)



1 An early mock-up of the game's key art – that pointy hat's been a big part of the lead character from the earliest days of development. **2** Siffrin has a quiet personality so their internal monologue lets you in on what they're feeling. **3** Rooms in the castle take up only one screen so you won't accidentally miss anything.


4
Start Again Start Again Start Again
FPS 60
WebGL
Attack
Craft
Guard
Pockets
HP
CHARGE
HP
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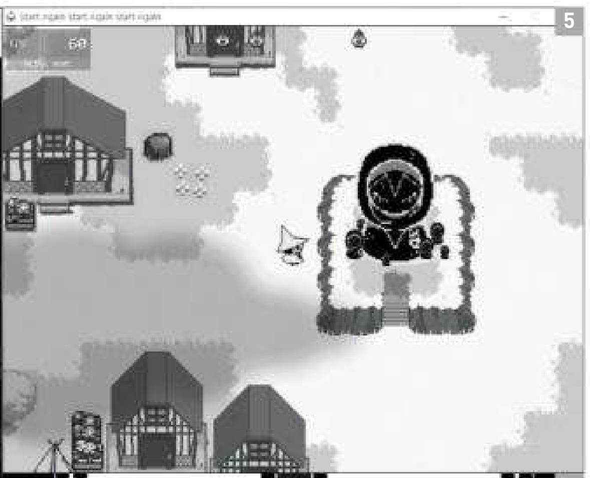
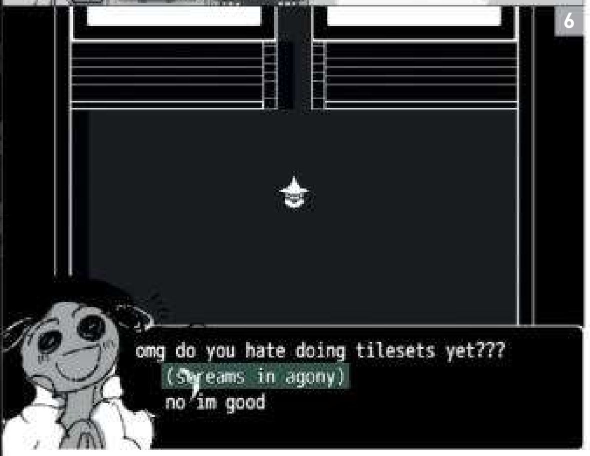
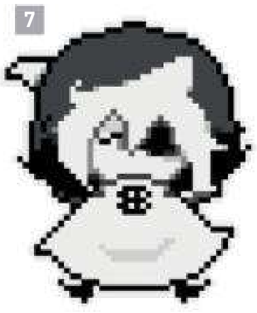


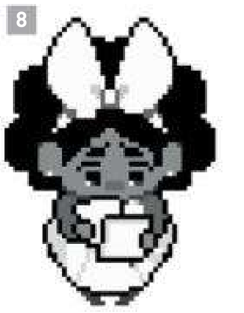


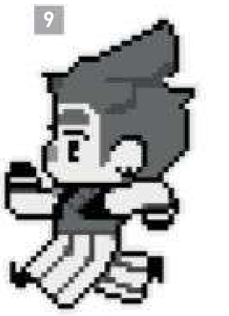
omg do you hate doing tilesets yet???
(Screams in agony)
no im good

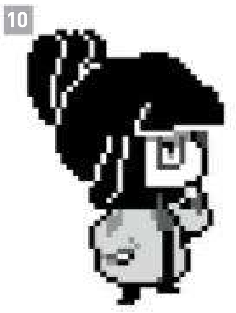
4 Enemies take the form of sentient 'sadness'. **5** A statue in the first area of the Change God, an entity in the lore. **6** The unending loop of tilesets, a dev's nightmare.

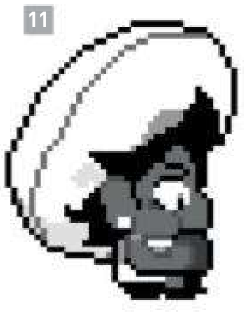
7 Each cycle begins with your character Siffrin waking up from a nap. **8** Mirabelle is the heart of the group, and has been blessed by a God. **9** Beau is the lovable himbo of the group. **10** Magic practitioner Odile is researching something secret. **11** Bonnie makes sure the group is well fed.









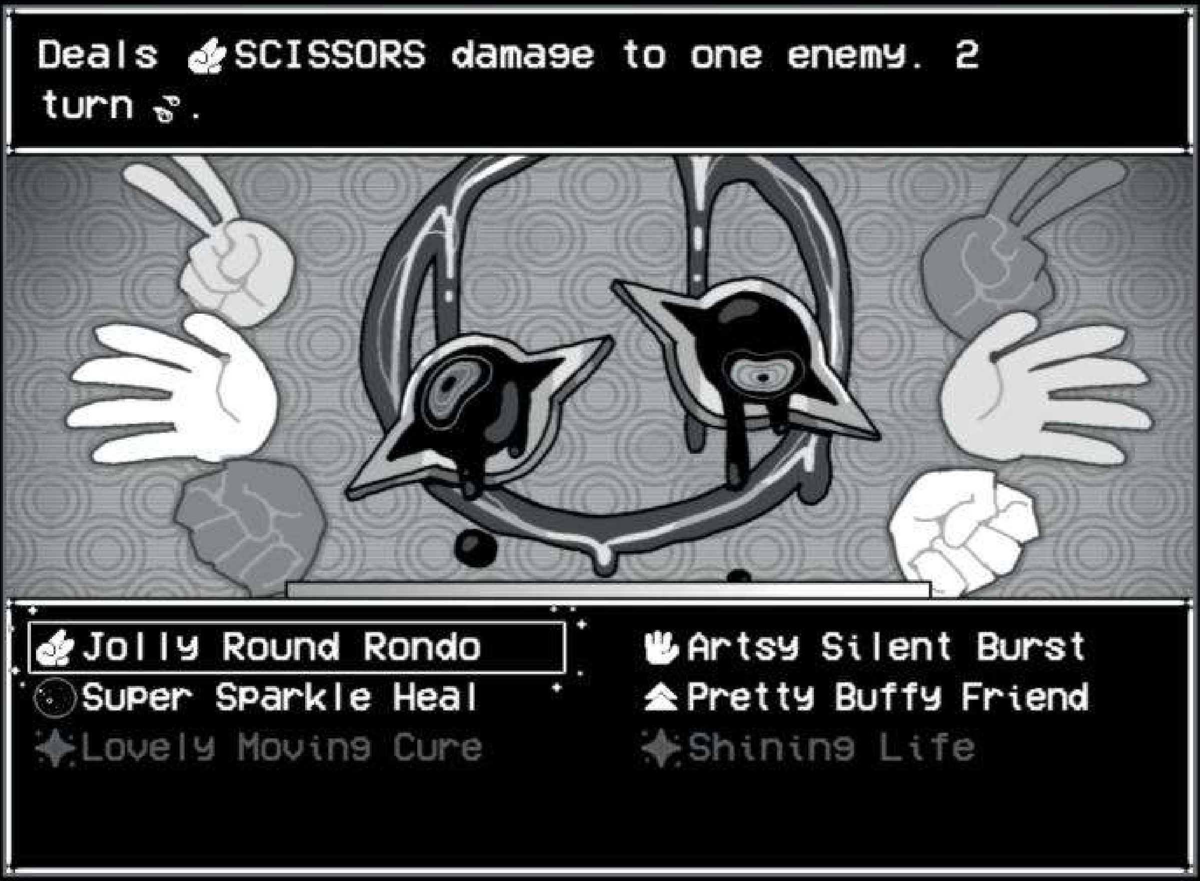


say. "Some players use the loop system to hop all over the place, but there are a number of players who choose not to kill Siffrin on purpose and go through the whole loop every single time. I expected that people would have different experiences, but it feels like there's so much more than I could have imagined."

There's no 'correct' way to engage with the looping system, but Bazir found that many players would loop in a way which felt 'authentic' to Siffrin's experience and story. As mentioned before, a big part of In Stars And Time is how the looping ability affects Siffrin. The more you loop, the more their personality changes. At first, they think it's a blessing but it soon becomes apparent that it's a curse. Frustration develops into desperation as Siffrin searches for a way to break the cycle. They become tired and more impatient as they witness the same story events over and over. Their dialogue options change as they have to listen to characters repeat their dialogue. Even their profile picture changes, from a chipper smile to fatigued, worn features.

For you, the player, looping is a safety net. It gives you more experience and knowledge so you can simply try again, but for Siffrin it's a psychological marathon. Bazir found that some players didn't want to rush through the dialogue they had read multiple times or refused to use Siffrin's dagger to loop faster (an option that unlocks at Siffrin's lowest, most desperate point). "A lot of people told me for a very long time that they didn't want to fast-forward through conversations because they were afraid that something would happen. But actually, nothing bad will happen if you do it, you will just feel bad, and people do feel bad," Bazir says. "With the dagger, it's not just that you're pressing quit and restarting, you're killing Siffrin on purpose. So, as the person controlling Siffrin, are you fine seeing it? Are you fine with the consequences?"

Watching a character slowly unravel is unnerving, all the more so when it's because of your decisions. You are confronted with your choices and forced to think about your personal boundaries when it comes to Siffrin's suffering. "When I play games like Danganronpa, horrible things happen to all of those characters," Bazir says. "My reaction is like, 'Tee hee, oh, it's terrible. Oh, it's so awful.' But here, it's different."


Deals ✌SCISSORS damage to one enemy. 2 turn ⌛.

Each floor has a mini-boss resembling a twisted sense of melancholy. You can beat it!

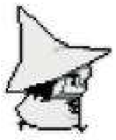
> "A NUMBER OF PLAYERS CHOOSE NOT TO KILL SIFFRIN ON PURPOSE AND GO THROUGH THE WHOLE LOOP EVERY SINGLE TIME."

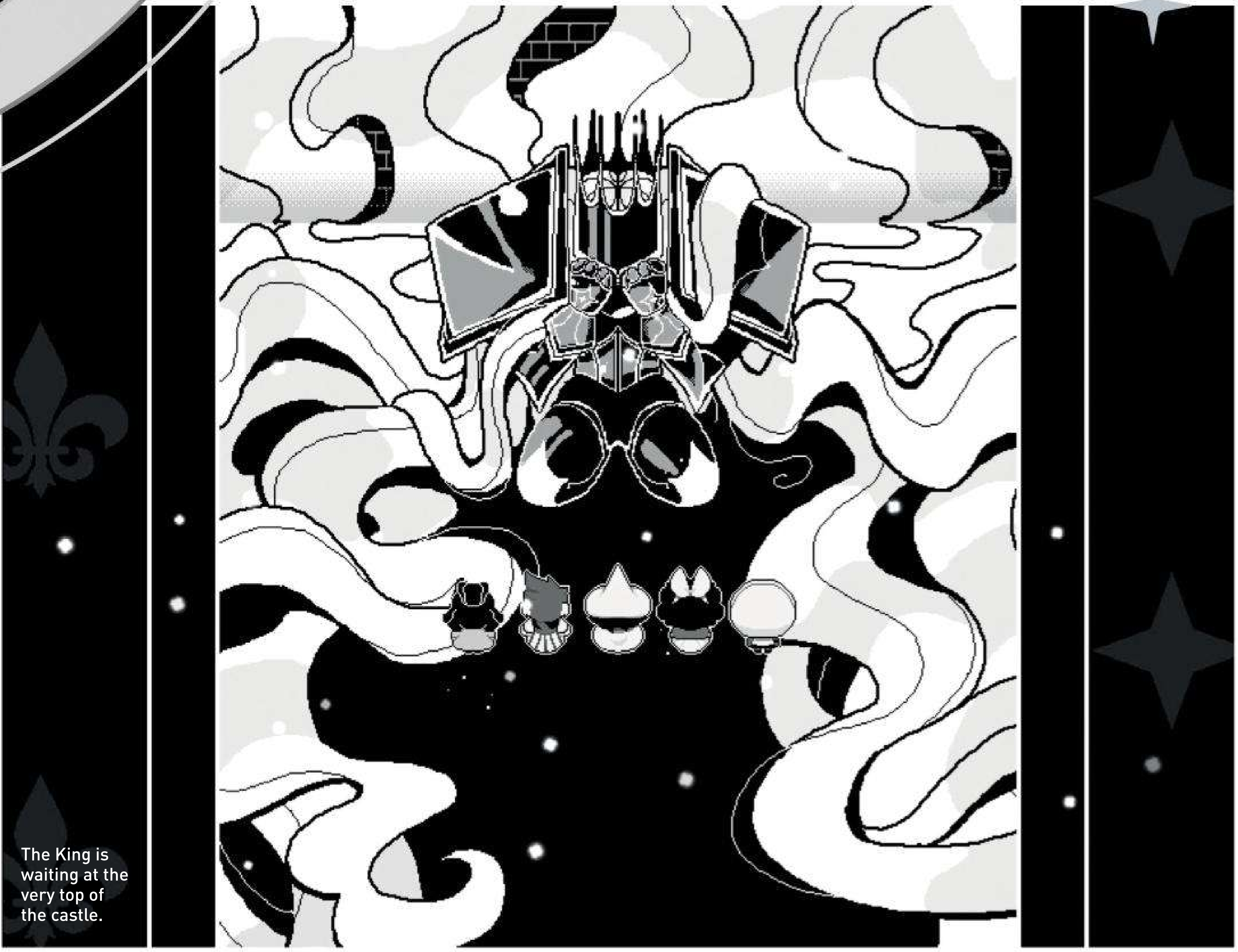
OVER AND OVER

What's incredibly smart in In Stars And Time is that Siffrin isn't merely stuck in a time loop, they're stuck in a videogame loop. Having Siffrin remember each loop is essentially the game recognising what it is, and actively engaging with you and your expectations as a player. In this way, the game has more in common with the existential dread of PC title The Stanley Parable than a classic RPG. Both actively disobey the structure of games to mess with player agency (and the helpless main character).

"Of course, I'm inspired by Undertale and Earthbound, I'm an indie developer! But The Stanley Parable is a real, conscious inspiration," Bazir says. "I was fascinated from a gameplay perspective and how it has a conversation with you, the player. From a player perspective, you get so used to the routine, and then when something is even a little bit different, it makes you question everything. The Stanley Parable gave me such a feeling of unease that I really wanted to put that in some way in the game."

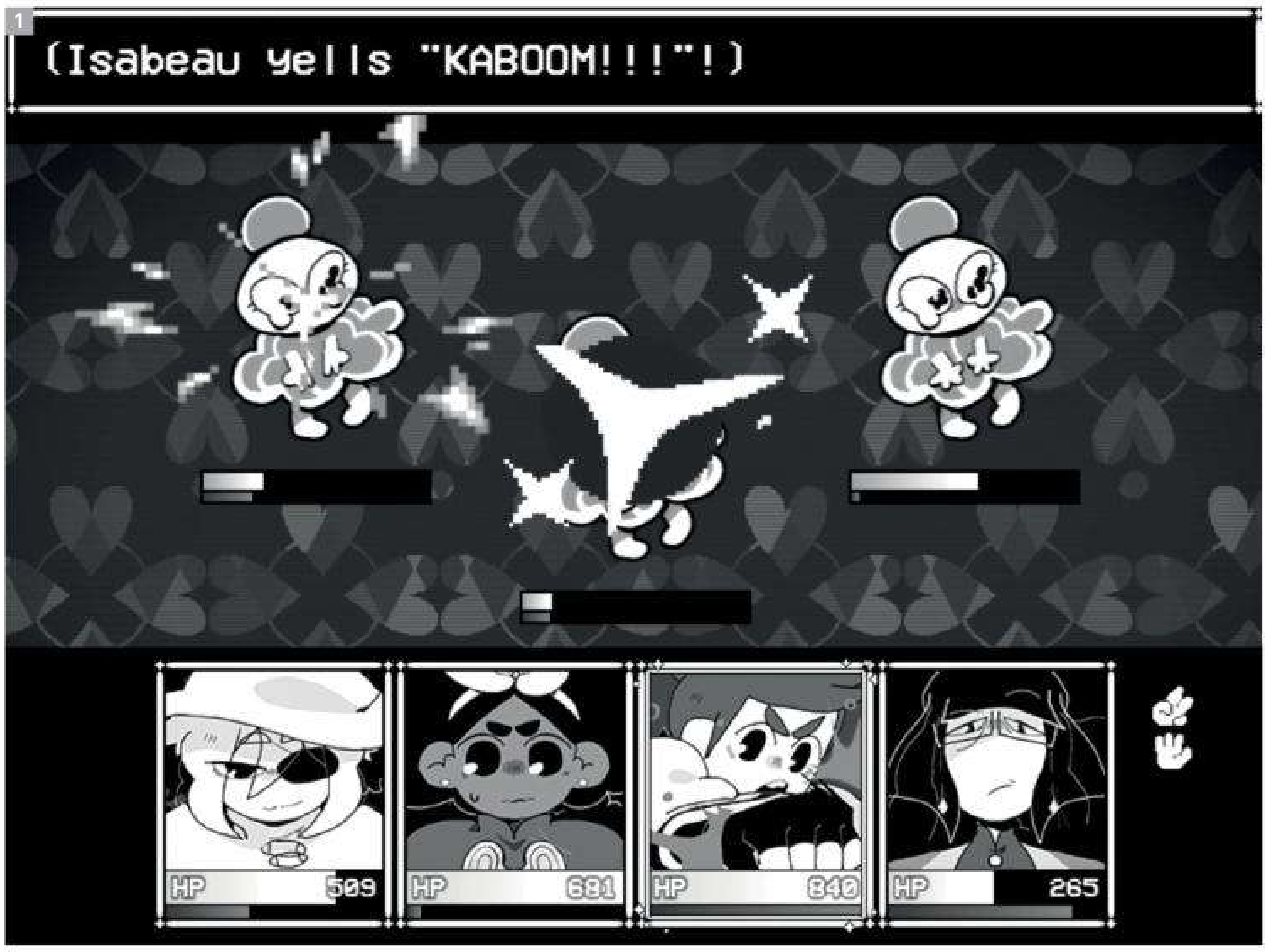
In Stars And Time understands the comfy routine we fall into when playing games, and uses it against you. It may mess with your personal boundaries, but your ultimate role is to guide Siffrin through a difficult situation. Siffrin does get a happy ending (yay!), but it comes after they learn to break the cycle. These loops are presented to each player in the same way, but the fact that everyone's given the freedom to engage with it in different ways is a testament to a smart, thoughtful game system. ■





The King is waiting at the very top of the castle.

1

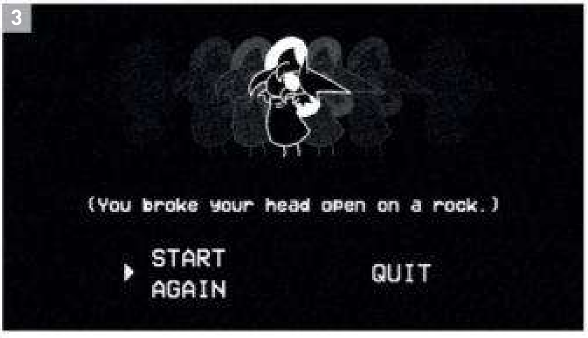


(Isabeau yells "KABOOM!!!"!)

HP 509
HP 681
HP 840
HP 265

2

3



(You broke your head open on a rock.)

▸ START AGAIN
QUIT

1 The rock-paper-scissors magic system is easy to understand straightaway. **2** It's the whole In Stars And Time gang! **3** One of Siffrin's many death screens.

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Reviews

“THERE’S PLENTY OF FUN TO BE PLUNDERED.”

098 Skull And Bones

068 Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

Deeper and more detailed – but some mysteries endure…

HIGHLIGHTS

THE OUTLAST TRIALS 076 | CLASSIFIED: FRANCE ’44 078 | BALATRO 079 | HELLDIVERS 2 080 | SPIRIT HUNTER: DEATH MARK II 082 | A LITTLE TO THE LEFT 083 | PENNY’S BIG BREAKAWAY 084 | ALONE IN THE DARK 086 STILT 088 | STAR WARS: DARK FORCES REMASTER 089 | WWE 2K24 090 | NEW STAR GP 092

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

Call it a homecoming

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £69.99
ETA Out now
PUB Square Enix
DEV Square Enix (Creative Business Unit I)
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 70-90 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Easy mode; 'classic' combat mode; customisable camera; togglable screen shake subtitles; extra mode options; adjustable slowdown speed in Tactical mode; auto-collect materials

Like the best of bakers, in creating Final Fantasy VII Square Enix is obsessed with layers. Where the first game in this remake trilogy took us through the tiered industrial city of Midgar, where the top-dwellers grow rich from bleeding the planet dry while those below live beneath a plated sky, this massive sequel takes us on a journey that cuts through many more strata.

There's Kalm, a sleepy, pretty citadel town that's built on the ashes of its precursor, a casualty of the Midgar-ruling megacorp Shinra's history of war. There's Under Junon, a town of refugees, literally covered by Shinra's weapon-of-mass-destruction-toting Junon fortress. There's sunny vacation spot Costa Del Sol where, behind the Hawaiian-like shakas and wheelie scooters, the corrupt mayor grows fat on letting Shinra have the run of the town. More than just fresh twists on a theme, the varied towns make each region in this lengthy, globetrotting journey feel distinct and alive. Shinra's Mako-siphoning is causing problems for all as the planet nears environmental ruin, but its effects are felt in different ways by its inhabitants.

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth is a layer cake unto itself, the sweet icing of serious, epic melodrama hiding an often bizarre yet delicious stacking of strange characters and minigames, just like in the original source material. Rebirth excels at being faithful to its roots, while adapting, expanding upon, and deepening the original's ideas to great effect. But bigger, more divergent changes are where the new version stumbles – a shame after the last game's climax seemed more gung-ho about veering off the rails.

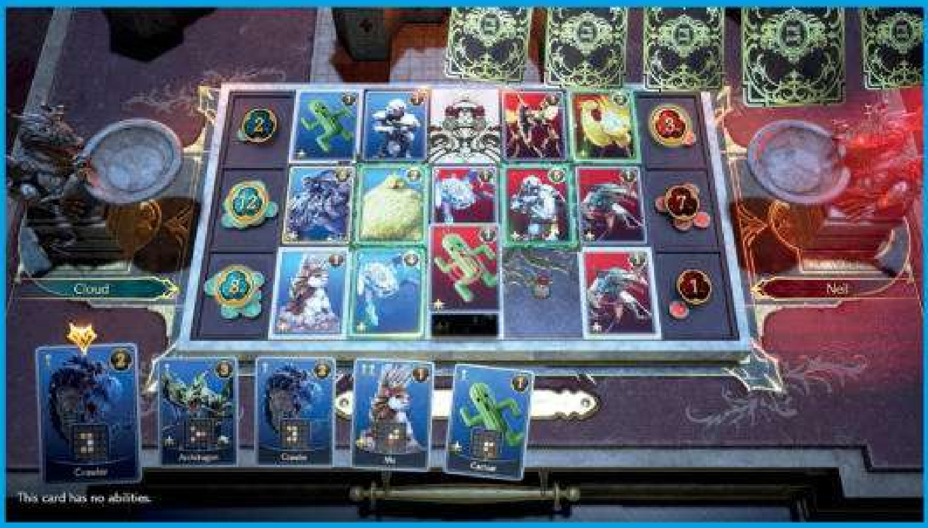
FIGHTING FATE

At the end of Final Fantasy VII Remake, destiny was in disarray. Rebirth begins knee-deep in that mayhem. The once-dead Zack Fair, rogue SOLDIER (a kind of superpowered agent for Shinra, enhanced with Mako) is now alive, kicking, and swinging the Buster Sword every which way as he safely delivers a young Cloud back to Midgar and busts a comatose Aerith out of Shinra custody. Rather than the escape we saw our RPG party make right before credits last time, things have gone south – but don't expect Zack to make too much of his new, off-kilter existence. His situation

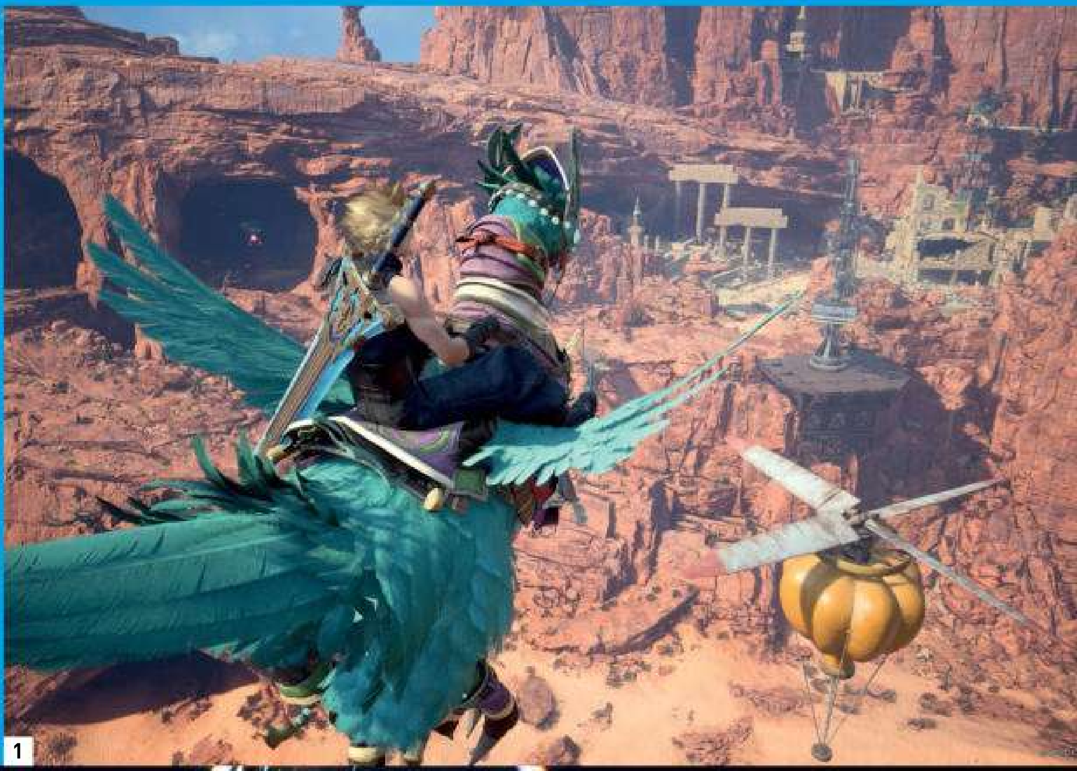
EDITOR'S AWARD
PLAY

FFVII's world feels absolutely huge, and is stuffed to the brim with things to uncover.

> Shinra's Mako-siphoning is causing problems for all, felt in different ways, as the planet nears environmental ruin.

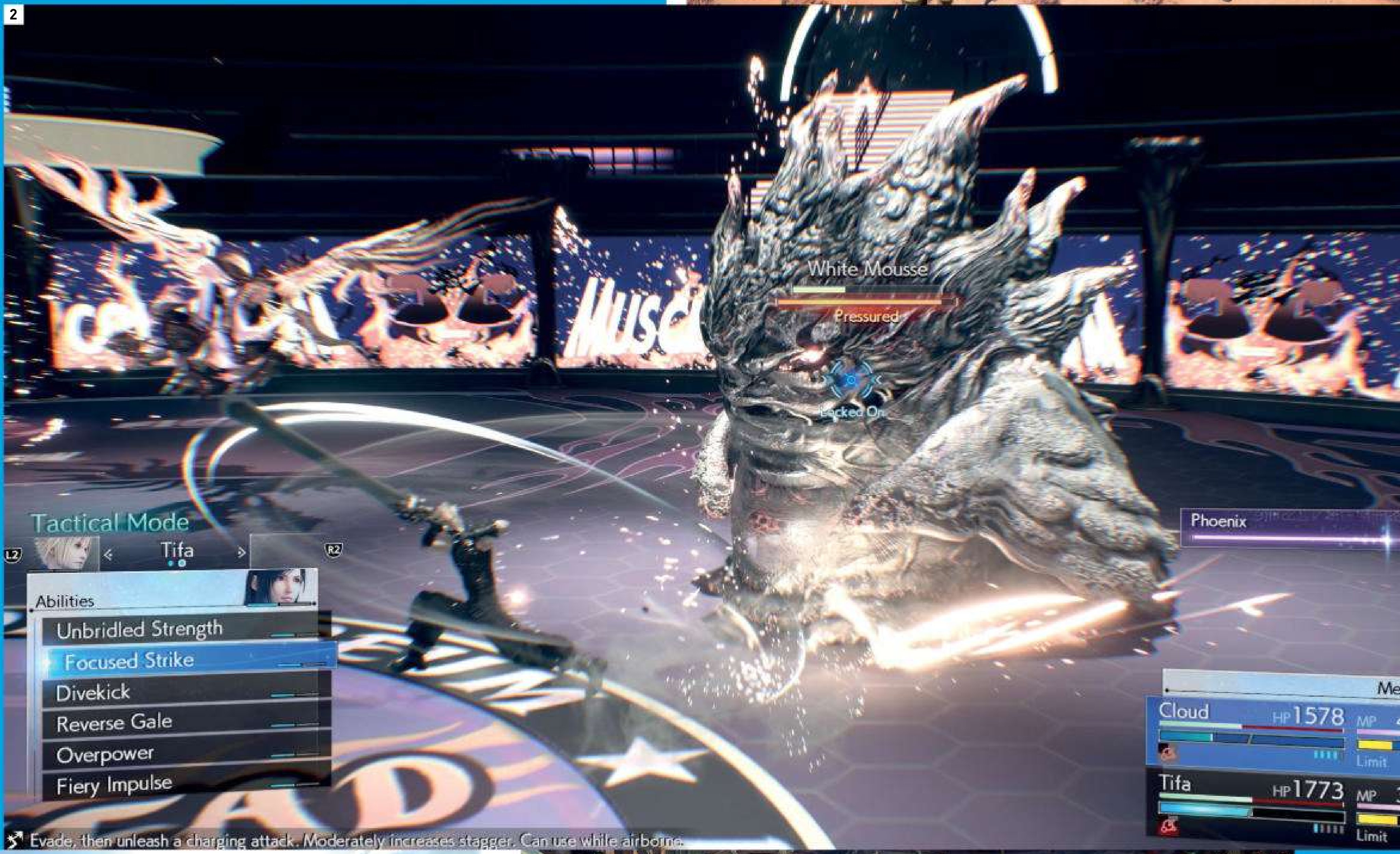

Cloud
Neil
This card has no abilities.

We dinged FFXVI for not having a weird little card game. FFVII Rebirth steps up – Queen's Blood is compelling both mechanically and (somehow) narratively.

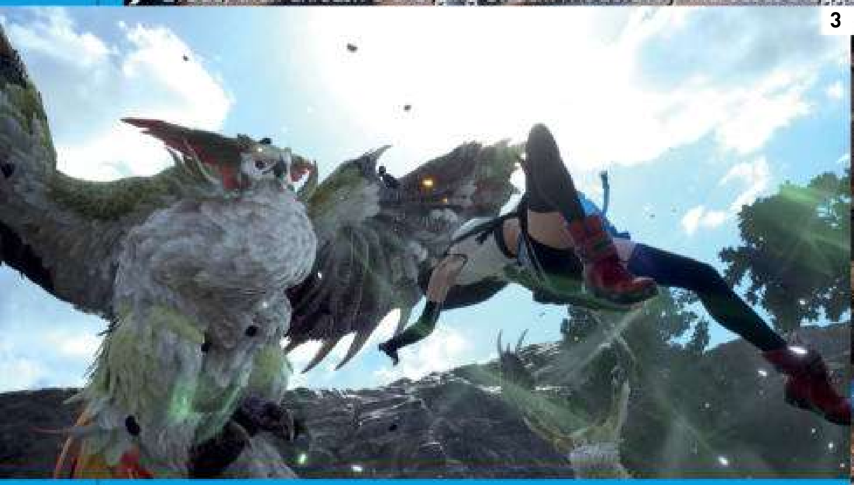


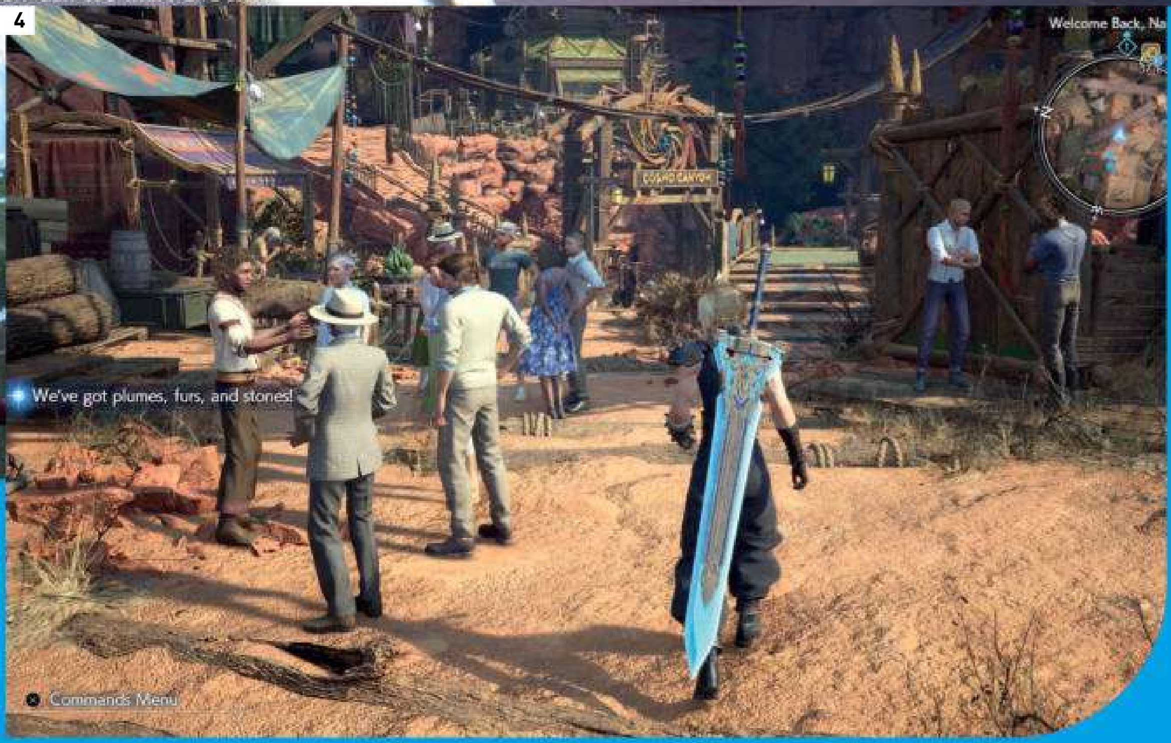
1

2


White Mousse
Pressured
Locked On
Tactical Mode
L2
Tifa
R2
Abilities
Unbridled Strength
Focused Strike
Divekick
Reverse Gale
Overpower
Fiery Impulse
Evade, then unleash a charging attack. Moderately increases stagger. Can use while airborne.
Phoenix
Cloud HP 1578 MP
Limit
Tifa HP 1773 MP
Limit

3 4




Welcome Back, Na
Cosmo Canyon
We've got plumes, furs, and stones!
Commands Menu

1 Each region's chocobos have their own exploration quirks. Cosmo Canyon's can glide from certain perches. **2** Action slows to a crawl when you enter Tactical mode, meaning you get a bit of time to think through your next moves. **3** Tifa takes to the air. Every character has more options to deal with tricky foes this time around. **4** Each settlement feels alive, with its own culture and problems.

doesn't have all that much impact on the events of Rebirth, and even so his scenes are doled out in tiny snippets containing minimal activity throughout the nearly-80-hour long main story. Rather than delivering on narrative ambition, Zack's inclusion feels like little more than marketing ambition.

The focus remains firmly on the AVALANCHE gang we know and love: socially awkward big-sword-wielder Cloud; ecoterrorist with a heart of gold and an arm of (gun)metal Barret; bartender and fist-first activist Tifa, who wants revenge for her destroyed hometown; and last of an ancient civilisation, feisty flower seller Aerith. They're properly joined now by mysterious beast Red XIII, who the party helped escape from a Shinra testing lab in Remake, as well as (eventually) ninja heroine Yuffie and dice-rolling robo-kitty Cait Sith. This puts Midgar in the rearview mirror as the gang pursues Sephiroth. As they attempt to foil the villain's world-ending plans, it's a globetrotting journey that goes all the way to the Forgotten Capital, which PS1 players will remember was home to hefty plot beats and lengthy swords. Much of the core beats and structure are kept intact, the developers resisting shaking things up too much, even though you fought and defeated the fates right before Remake's credits.

> Feels more like a middle entry, not a core story that stands alone.

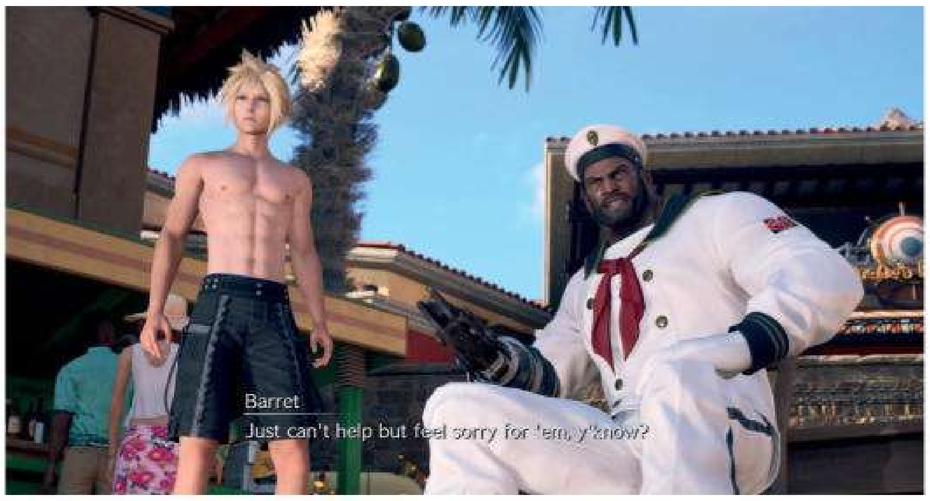
Of the series' numerous spinning plates, expect many to keep on rotating, none more so than those decorated with the possibilities of big departures from the original story. Crisis Core's Cissnei makes an appearance… but only in a minimal supporting role. The elite Tsviets unit, integrated into Remake's Episode Intermission DLC via a bombastic sequence… only features in a tiny flashback. Characters from the shuttered mobile phone battle royale spin-off The First Soldier are now vital to the plot… for some reason. Square Enix never seems to quite know what to do with all the expectation it's built up for this game.

Getting upset at what a game isn't can feel as fruitless as swearing you absolutely will use your most powerful healing items rather than hoarding them (you won't), but given how well-highlighted all the new and exciting elements in FFVII Remake were, it's hard not to notice how little is being done with them. We'd hoped this would have Empire-Strikes-Back-like energy, with foundations built upon and the story approaching full throttle, but instead this game feels like a middle entry rather than a core story that stands alone, as great as the expanded character work is.

ONE CONDITIONER

But this was always going to be a game that struggled under the Buster Sword's weight of expectations strapped to its back. That said, when that sword is drawn, it's capable of serious strikes; what's here is delivered with a finesse that few RPGs can match.

Far from being trapped in the shadow of Final Fantasy VII Remake, the fact that Rebirth is an immensely detailed adaptation of the middle portion of the original game distances it from the first part in big ways, not least of all in broadening what was previously quite a linear experience. At the same time what was already best-in-class combat evolves meaningfully thanks to full use being made of the larger cast of characters – no mean feat given the first game's extremely satisfying blend of strategic menuing with real-time hack-and-slash.


Barret
Just can't help but feel sorry for 'em, y'know?

Yes, there are outfits to choose from. Barret's dazzlingly pristine undercover sailor suit returns, and Cloud has a choice of two beachwear looks.

Cid Highwind's Tiny Bronco proves helpful to the party, though he's yet to step in to help with scraps.

These enhancements are neatly introduced via a playable flashback that sees a rookie Cloud returning to his hometown to check up on a Mako reactor in the company of Big Bad Sephiroth, pre-baddening. A chance to take control of the silver-haired, shampoo-hogging (it's canon) villain emphasises the antagonist's sheer raw power, before Cloud's brought into the mix. More of a newbie, Cloud is helped out by his more senior comrade with Synergies. These teamup attacks were introduced in a more basic form in the last game's DLC, but here they've become vital to the flow of bustups big and small.

Fights have a familiar FFVII Remake rhythm. You mash out attacks, dodges, and unique abilities with the face buttons to charge up your ATB gauge. You can then slow time to a crawl as you select actions and abilities that spend a chunk of that gauge, be they powerful weapon moves, spells, or even items (meaning planning when to drop a potion can involve weighing up risk and reward just as much as casting a fireball). Up to four ATB actions can also be activated in real time by pressing a shortcut button. It makes for a dynamic system that can nevertheless still feel quite strategic. You can switch between party members on the fly as well, the camera swinging over to them on the battlefield, meaning you're deploying not one but three engines of destruction to dish out damage.

While party members could benefit from each other's skills before, this is now much more of a mechanical focus thanks to Synergy Skills. Holding R1 gives you immediate access to unlockable tag-team moves to perform instantly with your other two party members, all of which offer amazing instant utility, and also answer some of the gripes we had with combat last time around. Aerith getting turned to paste while she sets up her party-boosting wards? She can use Bodyguard to instantly call a fighter to stand between her and the enemy, taking the heat. Tifa surrounded by pesky flying foes? She can use not one but two launchers to send her flying skyward. Making them cost-free really helps with the pace of fights, offering loads of options for rapidly changing stakes.

But those are just the start of the tag teams. Almost every ATB ability you use will grant a little Synergy pip. When two party members have enough each (often around three or so), they can spend them on a more powerful Synergy Ability team-up attack that offers situational advantages in addition to dishing out damage, be they magical area-splatting blasts, strikes that make staggered enemies take longer to get up, or even splitting your ATB bars into smaller chunks to allow you to use more abilities at a faster clip. Bringing characters together for moves isn't something you do simply to increase the top speed of combat, it also gives you more gears to shift into, emphasising the tactical layer.

Abilities aren't just designed to deal damage, but to force enemies onto the back foot.

CHARACTER DESIGN: TETSUYA NOMURA /
LOGO ILLUSTRATION:©

1

2

3

1 Sephiroth overshadows the whole game, sometimes whispering some concerning half-truths to Cloud. 2 Synergy skills give you loads of options mid-combat, all of which involve spectacular moves. 3 Zack who? Cloud takes a page out of Crisis Core's book, turning a beach umbrella into an improvised weapon.

» Every enemy can be pressured and then staggered to open them up to large amounts of damage, but what puts them under pressure can vary. Counters effective? Then boost up Cloud's Punisher mode parry stance. Elemental weaknesses? Then consider getting Aerith to set up areas that give free double casts and protect allies during spellcasting's slow windups. The chunky bosses you fight push you to engage with these mechanics the most as they take longer to go down, but can feel incredibly satisfying to best.

The returning Materia system allows you to further specialise your party through equippable spells and skills, such as leaning into perfect blocks or absorbing certain types of elemental damage. However, it doesn't feel like much has changed on this front, especially as party members can now learn attacks of each element to cast at no MP cost without having to equip the spell's Materia. (That said, these don't award Synergy pips, so there is a down side.)

Rather than collapsing the possibility space, these systems further enhance how unique each character feels to play; switching characters mid-battle sometimes feels like you're switching to a different game. Yuffie's still one of the best for character action fans, with the ninja heroine able to bounce between close- and long-range abilities as well as utilise multi-element ninjutsu as part of her basic attacks. Barret's able to tank up while unleashing barrages of bullets from across the field. Newly playable Red XIII is able to convert 'vengeance' earned by guarding into a powerful HP-sucking power-up mode, which can also be spent on providing party-wide buffs and healing. Cait Sith, another new character, is able to call in a robo-buddy to ride and even dish out randomised attacks and explosives. The variety on show is truly impressive. Any one of these party members could carry a complete game in their own right.

Any one of these party members could carry a complete game in their own right.

OVER WORLD

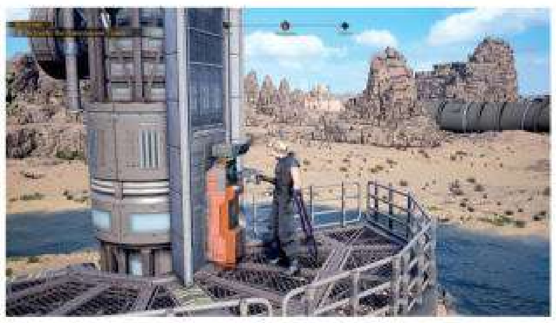
But back to Cloud and Sephiroth's business trip. The trek up Mount Nibel to check on the reactor isn't the same series of corridors as in the original. While there's a path to follow, even in this prologue trek it frequently opens up into wide areas where mobs of enemies roam. This doesn't mean no areas have the deft design of FFVII Remake's DLC dungeons, but most of the exploration throughout FFVII Rebirth is going for something different: open world.

Not long after this flashback, Cloud and co have to flee from Kalm to the Grasslands in order to avoid Shinra and continue their mission to stop Sephiroth from his goals of world domination and world destruction (his twisted vision is to build something new from the ruins of the planet). Stretching as far as the eye can see, the Grasslands are the first of several open zones the party must traverse, with plenty to find along the way.

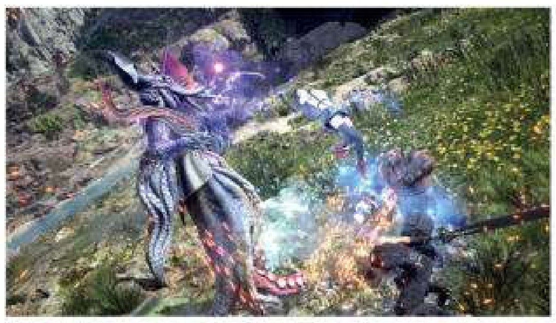
While this first area starts out seeming a little basic, it's much

TRAVEL GUIDE

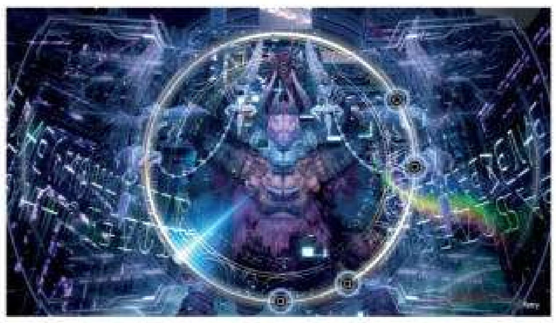
It's a big world – here's some of what to expect on your travels



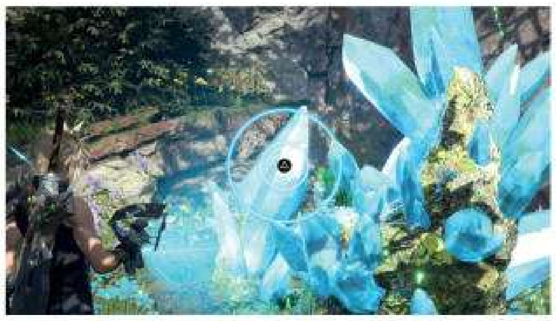
TILTED TOWERS
Climb towers and activate then to reveal more icons on the map – though they're protected by enemies and sometimes not simple to ascend.



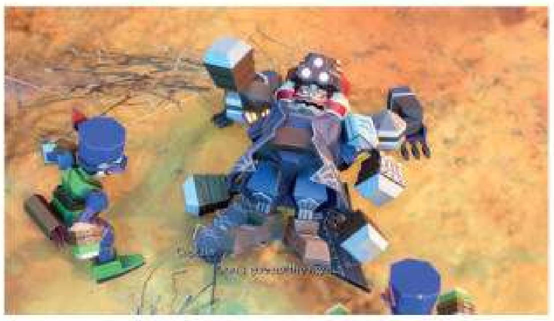
GETTING FIGHTY
Fight and defeat unique fiends with special rules to unlock VR challenges, which in turn grant rewards like special enemy abilities.



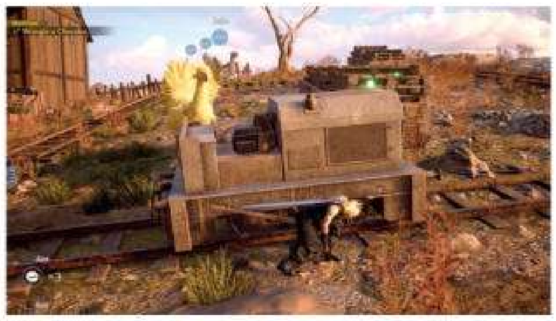
ISSUING SUMMONS
Find an ancient temple and complete the QTE not only to make it easier to recruit these deities, but to power them up when they join you.



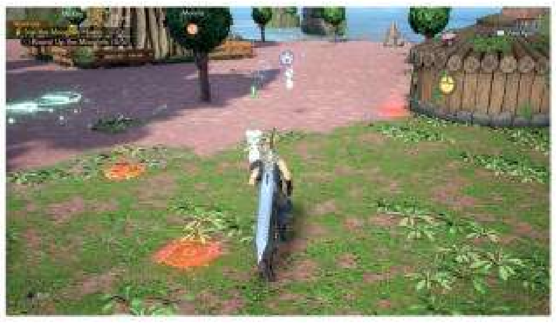
FLOW FORTH
Follow owls to lifespring crystals for bountiful resources, and to unlock information on excavation sites and each region's miniboss.



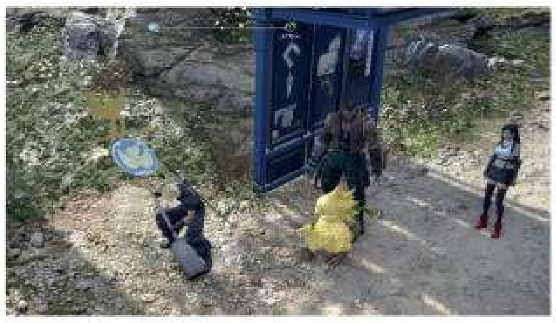
GILGA-MASH
Getting each area's proto-relic involves playing unique minigames, from Fort Condor's return to cactuar bashing. Get them all, get a reward.



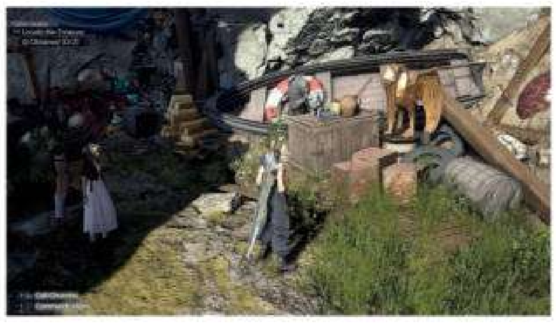
CHOCOBO RANCHER
Many regions require you to capture your chocobo before you can use it in maze-like stealth missions (thankfully, with frequent checkpoints).



MOG STATION
Visit a moghouse and best its mischievous moogle denizens at hide and seek, and you can trade them for better items that unlock extra abilities.



PUBLIC TRANSPORT
Spot a chocobo chick? They'll lead you to a ruined chocobo stop. Dust off the sign, and you can use it to fast travel and rest – if you have a cushion.



AVAST, TREASURE
Rather than treasure chests being dotted randomly around the open world, these caches are special areas where a set number are hidden.

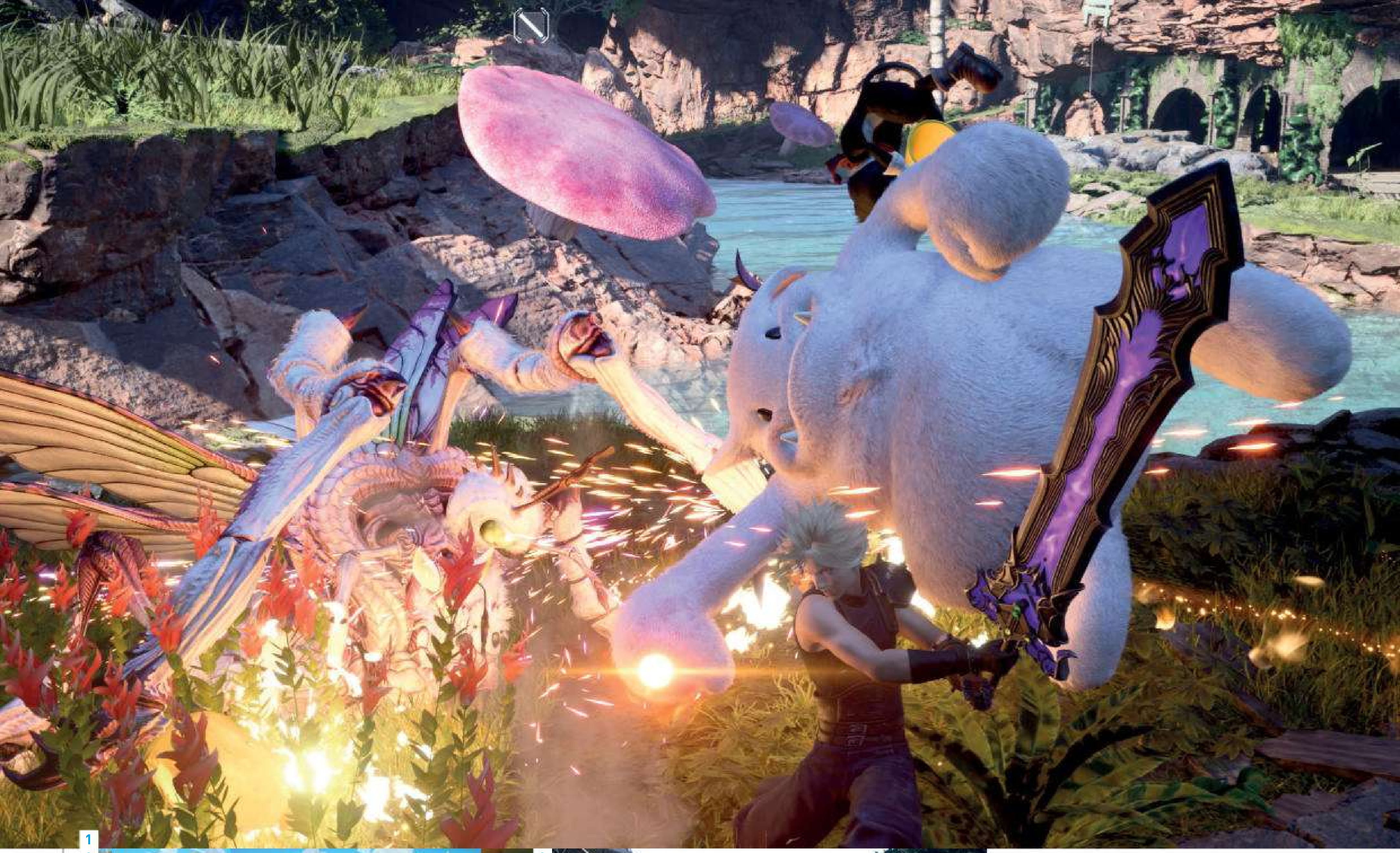
more interesting by the end thanks to the unique and well-judged pacing of each following area's design. In the region surrounding Junon, for instance, the city's just a short walk away, with the rest of the coastline explorable for optional goodies, while the later jungle region of Gongaga proves a challenge in itself simply to navigate thanks to intricate layers of bridges, ropes, and bouncy mushrooms. They're all meaningfully different spaces to unravel, yet won't hamper players more interested in gunning through the main story than exploring.

Yes, there are still 'Ubisoft towers' and crystals to scan in order to clear a checklist as part of each map's exploration tasks, but they're better in practice than they sound on paper. Several of the towers require a little head-scratching even to reach, and while the crystals don't have a lot to them, they do unlock the locations of blueprints allowing you to craft some (quite good) gear as well as special fiend battles which in turn can offer additional abilities. Scanning summon stones with a brief QTE challenge is worthwhile too, as it allows you to challenge the region's deity at reduced strength to more easily recruit them to your cause (though you are just as welcome to speak to your android pal Chadley and attempt to fight them at full strength in his VR combat sim for the honour if you wish).

LISTOPIA

Still, it can get a bit checklist-y, with plenty of icons on the map to tick off. This can feel confusing as elsewhere in the world some things to discover are neatly signposted, such as magical owls who lead you to their nest, or the glowing remnants of the temples that house the summons' crystals. We have some of our best moments of discovery when we stumble upon these for ourselves, before we've got around to activating the nearby tower. It can result in odd pacing too, with huge reveals and heavy moments often sitting far apart, and hours of exploration between – though that's perhaps down to us being unable to resist the allure of glowing spots on the map.

Needless to say, it makes the world feel absolutely massive and stuffed to the brim with things to do. Whereas on PS1 we were trudging around an abstract open world, now these regions are rendered in larger-than-life detail, with much more to do in them than fight random battles as you make your way from one town to the next. Even on chocobo-back (and beyond), there's awe-inspiring scale to every horizon, resulting in a world that's more connected than you'd have dreamed. Square Enix has really used the overworld-based source material



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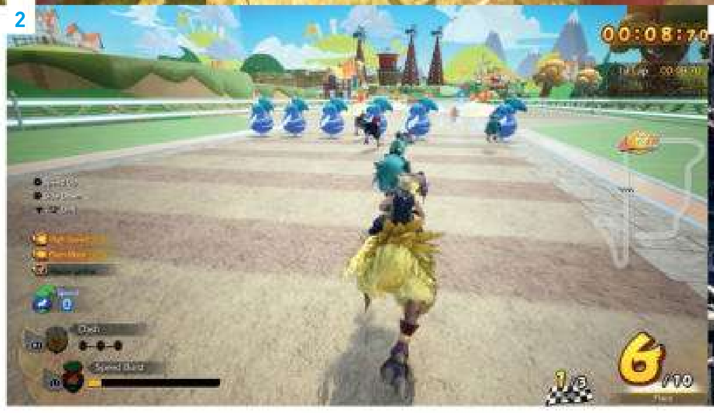

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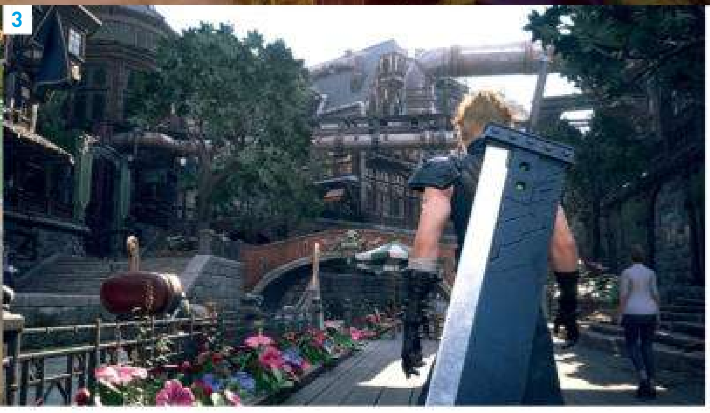


3

1 Cait Sith can ride his robo-moogle for big damage, or separate to split up their combat options. **2** Chocobo Racing returns, with an almost unreasonably large number of tracks and performance-altering gear. **3** Kalm is a beautiful backdrop for the game's opening, teeming with colour and life (and somewhat reminiscent of FFIX).

to create something more detailed than you'd have expected any development team to commit to. Proto-relic quests are a particular highlight because of how they're unique to each region, offering their own little adventures, including the return of the Fort Condor minigame, a nod to FFXII's gambits, and much, *much* more – and they play into a larger arc that spans the whole game, allowing you to assemble an ancient armour set.

PLANET'S VOICE

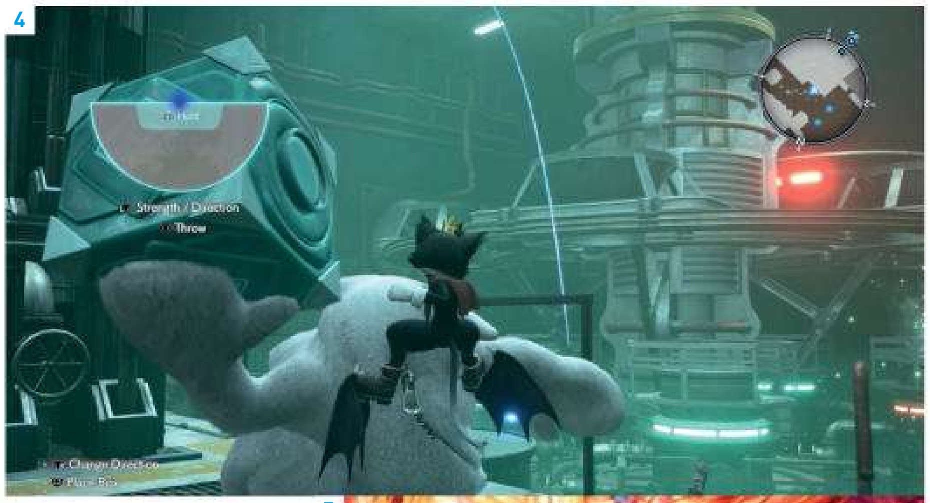
That scale and level of detail makes FFVII's world feel truly alive, both in the way it teems with beasties and the way each settlement has its own cast of quirky characters. Where FFXV and FFXVI were both constructed to be of a similar scale (the former with a vast, though often empty, open world, and the latter with more corridor-based open zones), their own encroaching fantasy apocalypse often made the larger world feel somewhat barren. In FFVII Rebirth, being close to the brink of catastrophe only brings out more life in the communities you meet, making the stakes of Avalanche's fight feel all the more pressing and real. It's aided by loads of cute incidental dialogue and animations from NPCs who populate the areas, ranging from someone adorned with their favourite plushies to an Instagram-like couple who are crafting the perfect poses in front of a town's clock tower.

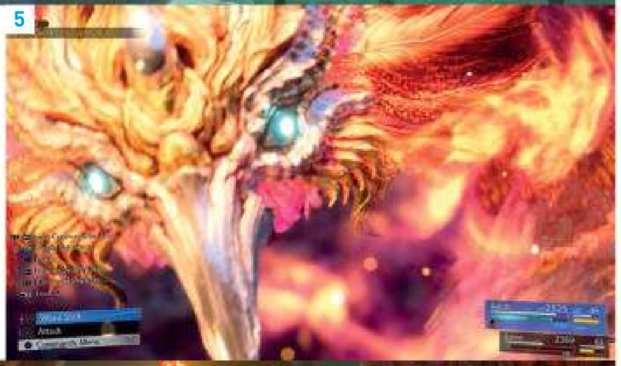
That extra detail also benefits your party members. While the broader story suffers from being the middle entry in a three-game series, the same isn't true of your party's character arcs. Everyone gets room to breathe. We'd say this is some of the best character work the series has had to offer, thanks in part to all the downtime this lengthy journey provides. Aerith and Tifa's relationship as two women of a similar age really benefits. There are more opportunities for moments when they can bond, and even a sequence where they hang out while getting ready to go to the beach (with minigames galore, of course, much in the style of the minigame-heavy source material).

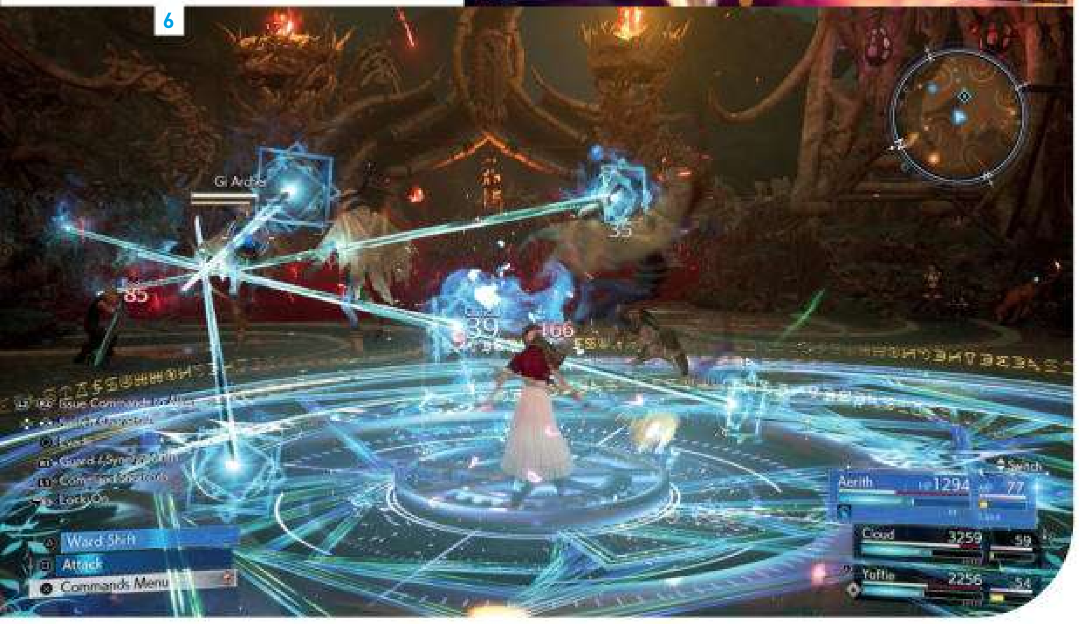
Emotions get raw too, with Barret's history particularly well served. On top of great writing and acting plus a score that knows just when to swell, the mechanics help to sell it. The developers appear keen to avoid this becoming The Cloud Show, giving every party member their own time to shine, whether that's in leading their own dungeons or tense one-on-one boss fights. These alternate perspectives prove especially effective as Cloud's point of view becomes increasingly scrambled, and he continues to struggle with haunting visions courtesy of Sephiroth.

Even the most basic side-quests are stuffed with these character moments, be it Barret voicing his struggles to do right as a father to his daughter who's in hiding back in Midgar, or checking in on some returning characters from the first game (even if those developments often serve to simply tease further ones for the third game). It means they're all worth

> Everyone gets room to breathe. This is some of the best character work the series has had to offer.







4 Party members get their own dungeons. Cait Sith's involves too much box action. 5 Summons can come in vital in big brawls – Phoenix can drop a big heal, for instance. 6 Aerith's still slow to get going, but can wreak magical havoc.

taking the time to do. Even a side-quest revolving around a new card game has a surprisingly compelling narrative hook early on. Every task you take on gets its hooks into you, either mechanically or by offering another opportunity to vibe with characters you've come to love.

Even grumpy pilot Cid and gunslinging vampire Vincent feature, though as unplayable additions to the party (for now, at least), they have very little to do. We can't shake the sense that there's just *so much* packed into FFVII Rebirth that Creative Business Unit I doesn't know quite what to do with many of the toys it's pulled out of the box. This ultimately results in an ending that somehow feels slightly rushed, despite coming at the end of an experience that lasts at least 70 hours, rehashing the first game's spectacle with a bit of spice before shunting resolution further into the future yet again.

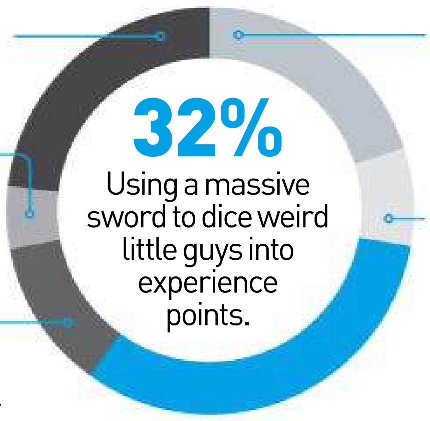
FFVII Rebirth ends up a messy game, then, but its ambitious swings pay off more often than not. Make no mistake, this is an absolutely epic journey that sends you out to explore a huge world, with real-time combat that makes your party feel like one great big team in a way few other games have ever managed to accomplish. The story in this middle entry doesn't quite stick the landing, but the game built around it absolutely does, raising the bar significantly for RPGs of this scope. While taking a swing at fate's threads feels narratively underserved, Rebirth still presents a planet and people worth fighting for right through to the bitter end.

Suffering in parts for being so stuffed, this is nevertheless an improvement on the first part of the remake trilogy, the original game, and the wider genre. Oscar Taylor-Kent

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: FFVII: REBIRTH



32% Using a massive sword to dice weird little guys into experience points.

23% Holding Ⓡ as Barret to unleash hot lead from the back lines.

5% Rebuilding your Queen's Blood deck to beat a pesky challenger.

12% Feeling like some of these dungeons are a bit longer than needed.

20% Ticking off icons on the map, and having a blast while doing it.

8% Recognising bits from the PS1 game and loving how they've been revamped.

STATPACK

36 Side-quests to complete, varying in scope quite a lot. Almost all contain strong character moments, so are well worth playing through.

14 Chapters, some much longer than others. There are manuscripts to find in each, though note that some only appear in Hard mode.

145 Queen's Blood cards to collect, which all function differently in your 15-card strong decks. Want the lot? Some are tough to track down.

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

DUALSENSE MICROPHONE Chadley and new partner MAI will loudly tell you all about the open world challenges non-stop.

MOTION-CONTROLS Motion sensors can be used to aim in several minigames (and the triggers are used for sit-ups, too).

LOVING/HATING

MINIGAME HEAVEN
We love the commitment to replicating FFVII's penchant for weird minigames by adding even more – faithful *and* fun.

ZACK'S... BACK?
Stretched thinner than a Bomb's patience, Zack's return begins to grate on us owing to just how stingy his scenes are.

TROPHY CABINET

WEAPONS 101

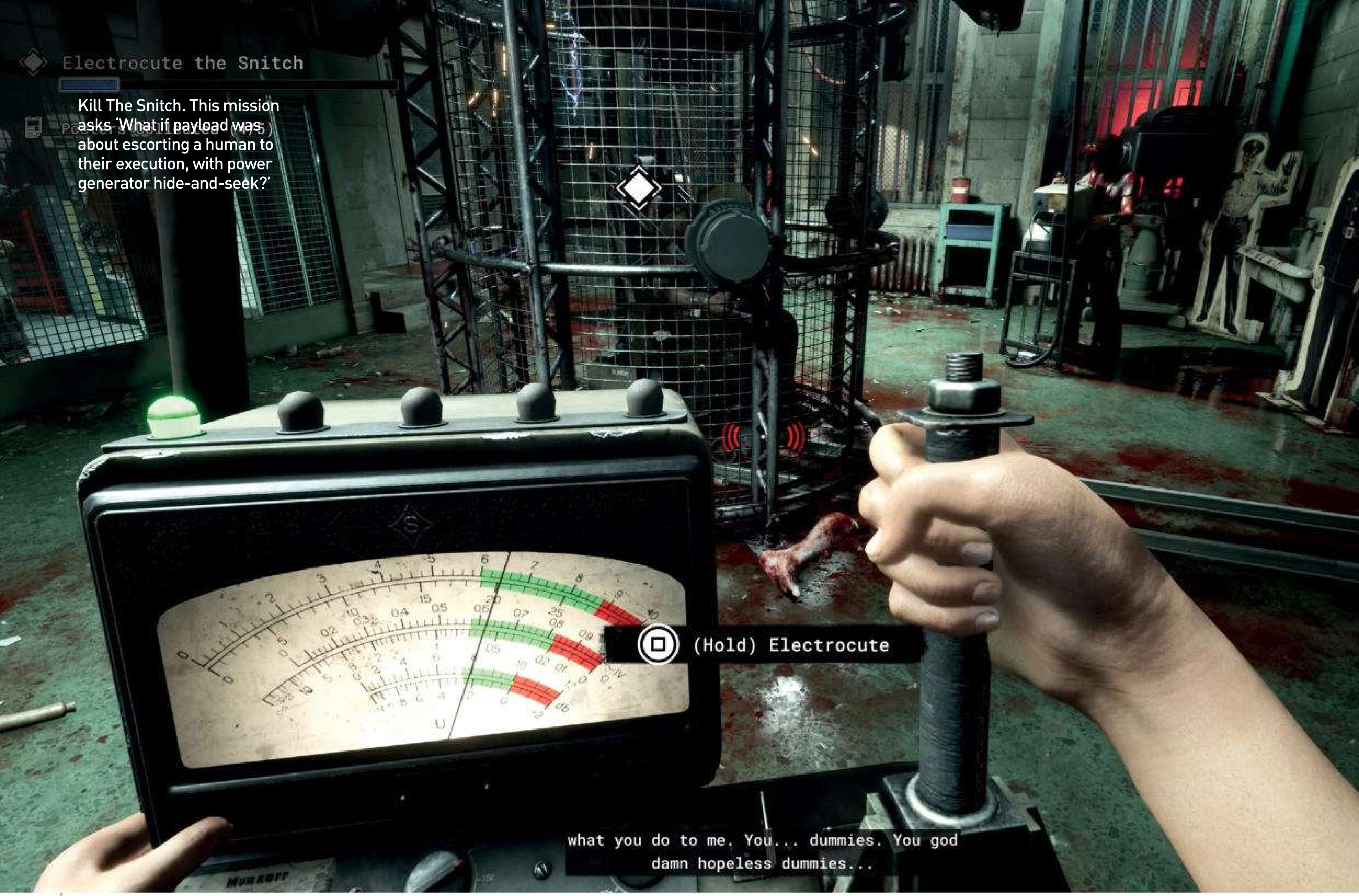
BRONZE
Max out proficiency with a weapon's skill to carry it across to new ones.

BLADESMAN OF LEGEND

SILVER
Defeating Gilgamesh is one thing – getting to challenge him, another.

7-STAR HOTEL

GOLD
Earn every possible collectible to proudly display back at Costa Del Sol.



what you do to me. You... dummies. You god damn hopeless dummies...

Kill The Snitch. This mission asks 'What if payload was about escorting a human to their execution, with power generator hide-and-seek?'

The Outlast Trials

Soon may the Skinner Man come

Oh no. This isn't Outlast 3. This is a long, drawn-out sigh of a game that squanders all the potential an Outlast prequel held. The number of people who wanted Outlast as a live service multiplayer game can probably be counted on one hand, and it's whoever came up with the idea.

Most developers seem hungry for a slice of the multiplayer pie right now, and it's natural that sacrifices must be made for that, but lines should also be drawn. So while it's no surprise there's so little of Outlast's usual on-rails story-based experience to be found here, it is still rather disappointing. Especially as even the ominous Murkoff facility doesn't seem in keeping with the previous games' stories.

The more of The Outlast Trials you discover, the more saddening it is to realise what it could have been instead. The documents scattered around the trials are a noble attempt at tying this back into the other games (and further cementing the mysterious relationship between the first two entries), but that desire for continuity is not reflected in any of the game itself. New bosses Gooseberry and Coyle are largely there because the ideas were creepy, but hold no relevance to the wider story. There's a strong sense of Red Barrels trying to create memorable villains at the expense of series cohesion. This might even have worked outside the context of an Outlast game, and if either villain had been given enough time to truly shine in more than chunks of danger which they have to take in turns.

PS5
THE OUTLAST TRIALS

INFO

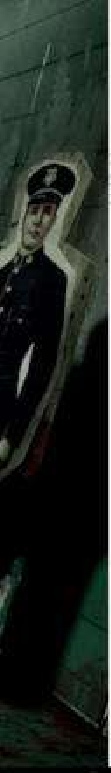
FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £30.99
ETA Out now
PUB Red Barrels
DEV Red Barrels
PLAYERS 1-4
LENGTH 20+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable subtitle size and background, look sensitivity, and motion blur; master/music/effects volume options; tinnitus filter; interface customisation including aim dot and toggles for indicators (health, objectives, and so on)

TRIAL AND ERROR

Outlast as a series has always been audacious in its gore, swearing, and sexual references, and The Outlast Trials is no exception, but in the process it often comes across as trying too hard to be scary or disturbing, neither of which actually work when it's being so ridiculously pushy about it.

The clunky mechanics in play fare better. The trials and challenges you must work through to be 'reborn' see you sneaking around a few bizarre maps, undertaking small tasks such as repairing generators (that sounds familiar), finding oh-so-many keys, and getting Murkoff's money's worth out of a weirdly out-of-place meat grinder. Stumbling around in the dark with your emotional support brick and raiding everything for useful items adds a new sense of tension and desperation to being outnumbered and out-muscled. In fact, each individual trial is a surprisingly accurate mini-Outlast when it comes to donning night-vision gear and evading numerous enemies who hate your guts simply for existing. However, that effectively means that this is several shoddy, bite-size Outlast games in a trenchcoat.

> The more you discover, the more saddening it is to realise what it could have been.



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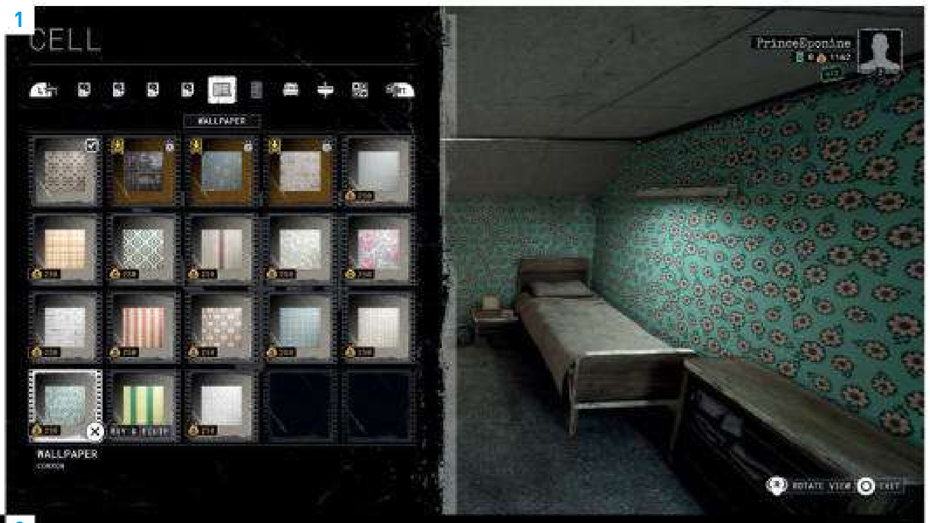

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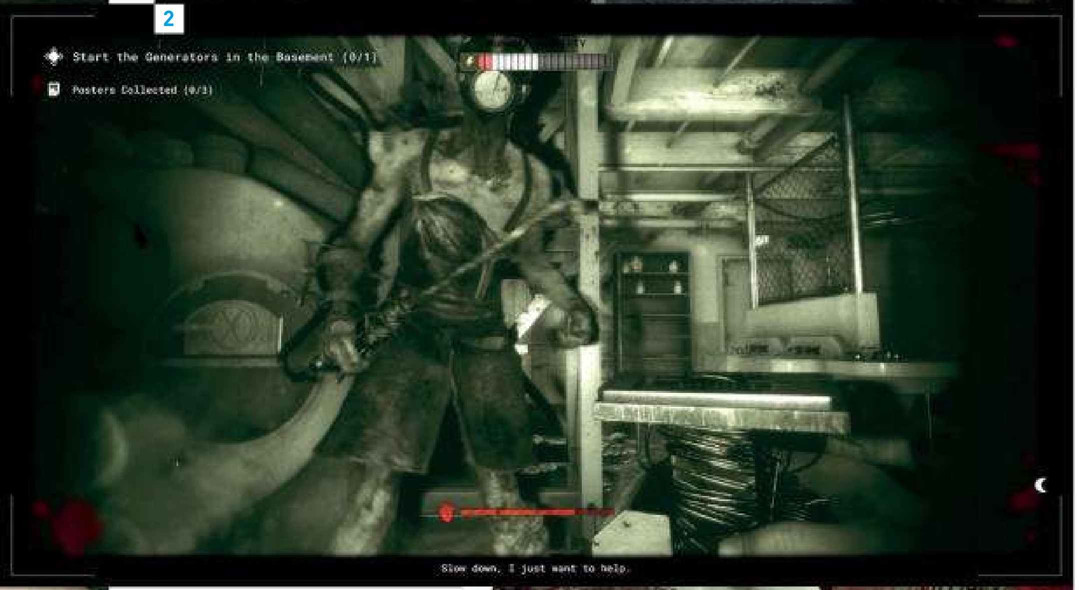
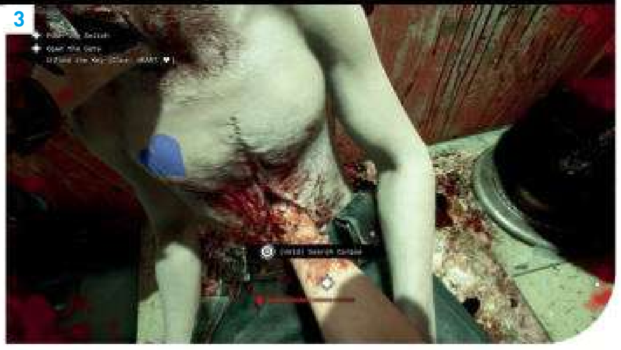

Start the Generators in the Basement (0/1)
Posters Collected (0/3)
Slow down, I just want to help.

3


1 Cell, sweet cell. There are many like it, but this one is mine. **2** There are moments of tense pursuit that evoke the survival horror tension of the original games. **3** No butterflies in his stomach, but there might be a key in here.

Just as Coyle and Gooseberry have untapped potential, so too do the setups for the maps – you can't shake the sense that each could have been bolstered into a fuller standalone experience. Instead, everything comes off as mismatched and tiresome. (To the developer's credit, it's been rolling out additional content since the game's early access PC release, so this could be something that improves over time.)

LET ME OOOUUUT

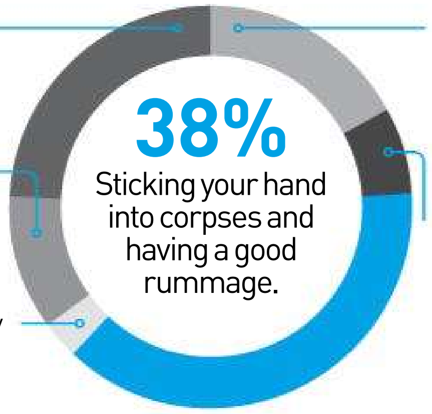
Customising your character and decorating your cell are surprisingly robust and possibly one of the most appealing parts of the whole experience, except that means you have to actually play the game lots in order to earn Murkoff dollars to purchase what you want. Grinding out missions can be financially rewarding, but these levels are repetitive to push through, and can be particularly gruelling if you're playing solo or with the wrong matchmade party. Get a good group, though, and things get more enjoyably frenetic – though it's still hard to mask how tiresome and full of backtracking each mission can be. Unavoidably too, co-op massively reduces the tense atmosphere, another odd mismatch given the horror of being isolated and vulnerable is at Outlast's core. So, as the TV screens occasionally flash up between Rorschach-style patterns, the game really is 'better together' but unfortunately it also isn't likely to have much of a lifespan.

Though the game grows on you with time (more like mould than a friendship), so too does the feeling that it lacks what made the originals great. **Max Williams**

4
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: THE OUTLAST TRIALS



38% Sticking your hand into corpses and having a good rummage.

24% Looting the bodies of the Reagents that came before you.

11% "I hear a gosling softly a-jostling!"

3% Ignoring therapy in favour of arm wrestling and chess matches.

17% Breathing in lots and lots of green smoke against your will.

7% Swapping between running and sneaking so fast you get whiplash.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

SERGEANT COYLE
A dirty cop who prowls the 'police station' hoping to show you his painful idea of justice.

MOTHER GOOSEBERRY
Disgraced children's TV host. Nobody's actual mother.

NURSE BARLOW
Runs the pharmacy and is set on singing the praises of Dr Easterman.

STATPACK

23
Rx prescriptions you can purchase from the Sleep Room's pharmacy (which opens when you hit player level three) across three tiers.

20
Hairstyle options to choose from for your Reagent, though they'll all get covered in blood eventually anyway. Ah, it'll wash out…

95
Evidence documents to find for that sweet, sweet Outlast lore. That's one of our favourite things in the whole game, to be honest…

THE FIRST THREE HOURS

1 The protagonist undergoes a recap of their old life, which they must throw away as part of their conditioning. **2** You're assigned a trial to infiltrate a fake police station to kill an allegedly real snitch. **3** After gaining a few therapy levels, you can get upgrades from Mr Noakes the Engineer and Nurse Barlow at the pharmacy.

TROPHY CABINET

HEMOPHILIAC

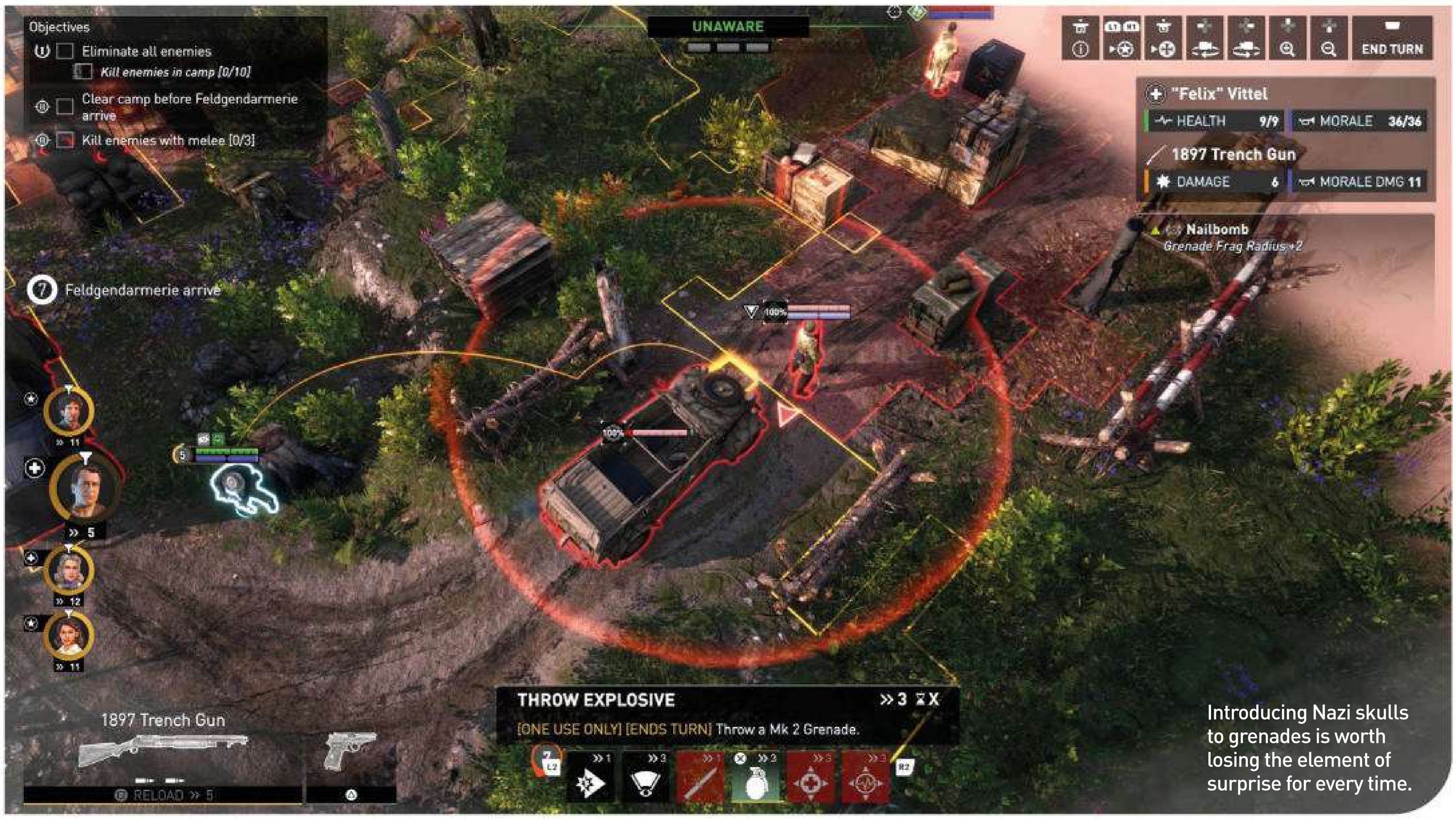
BRONZE
Bleed everywhere for a grand total of 10,000 health points. How many litres is that?

BAMBOOZLER

SILVER
Throw items to distract enemies or stun them. Do it 50 times.

BIG SAVER

GOLD
Nab 15 evidence docs. Easier said than done as their placement is randomised.



Introducing Nazi skulls to grenades is worth losing the element of surprise for every time.

Classified: France '44

WW2 + XCOM = wow!

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £34.99
ETA Out now
PUB Team 17
DEV Absolutely Games
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 50+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Extra subtitles; unit outlines; adjustable camera movement speed; disable camera shake; blood and motion blur toggles

This takes XCOM's brilliant formula of turn-based tactics and sets it during WW2 in Nazi-occupied France. Some game ideas are so good that the only worry is that the developer will screw them up. Luckily, Absolutely Games has triumphed. This is a terrific tactics game wherein you sneak around killing Nazis, run around loudly killing Nazis, and spend hours stroking your chin as you ponder the optimum way to kill as many Nazis as possible.

The stealth is tense and challenging, but the shootouts where you're flanked on all sides are just as satisfying to overcome. Trying to keep your squad alive gets pleasingly complex without overwhelming you, thanks to a clear UI. Its main innovation is troop morale, because along with the more traditional health bar every unit also has a blue morale bar. This depletes whenever the unit is fired upon, regardless of whether the shot hits. If the bar goes down by half, the unit becomes 'suppressed' and its movement is limited. If it depletes completely, the troops become 'broken' and the unit can't move at all until you get its morale back up. It's a clever extra plate to juggle, meaning almost every shot makes a difference.

DIRECT HIT

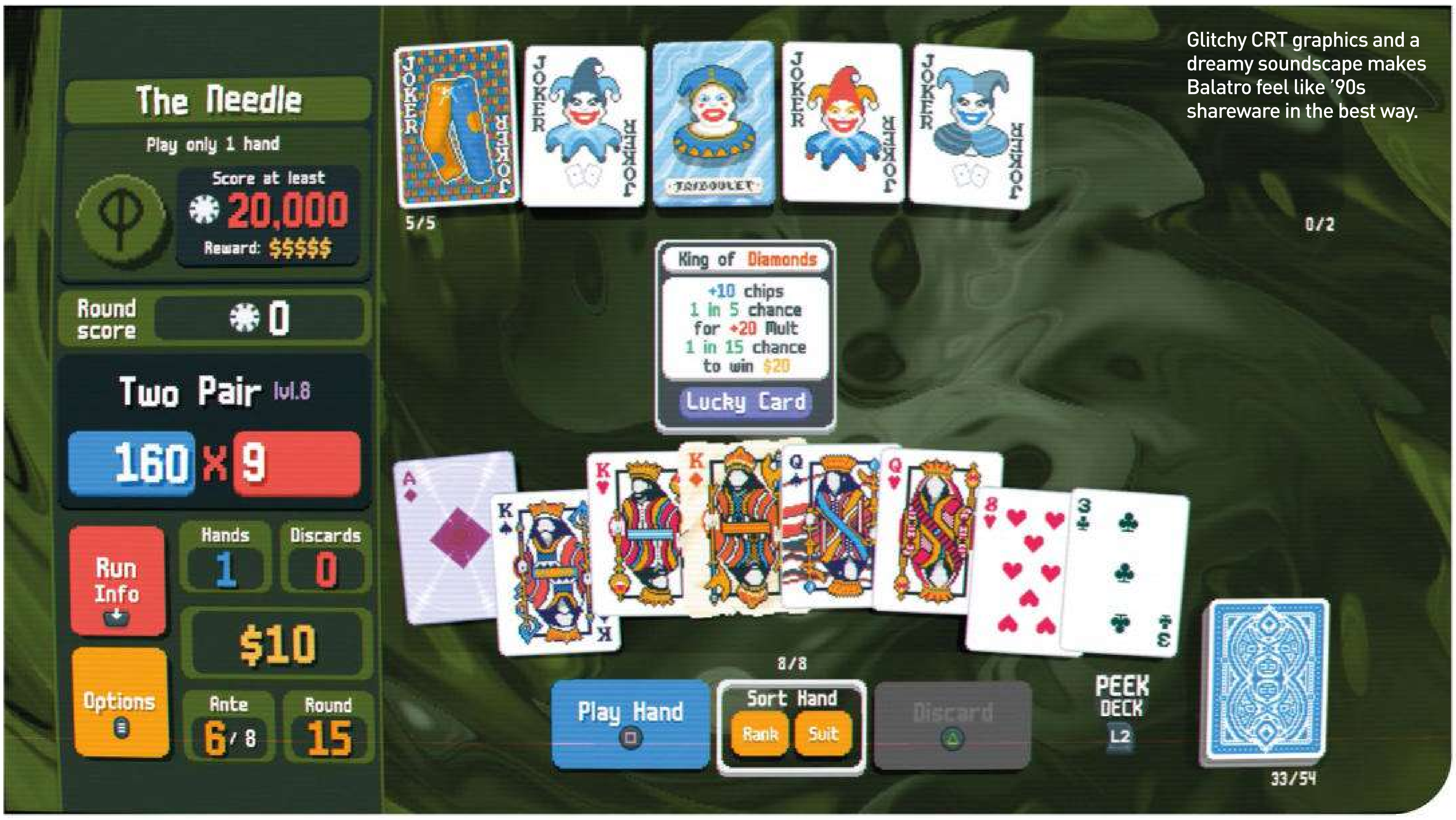
Between missions you can upgrade your units, making them more efficient at stealth, capable of boosting morale, and so on. There are weapons to buy and the odd tough choice to make, but it's not as distressing as XCOM's constant rush to research weapons capable of helping you keep pace with an increasingly overwhelming threat. That does make it significantly less stressful to play than XCOM, but isn't war meant to be hell? Perhaps, but Absolutely Games has opted for a more Hollywood retelling, with a cast of joyously hammy stereotypes, and a love of unashamedly videogamey ideas (lots of explosive red barrels litter these battlefields). The game doesn't shy from the horrors of this war – characters discuss the fate of Jews taken to the camps – but also has your British soldiers making absurd stiff-upper-lipped quips when they dispatch Nazis. That can feel tonally jarring, but it never falls into tastelessness. The devs have clearly researched the period thoroughly with respect and care, and why shouldn't killing fascists be fun?

> The dev has opted for a more Hollywood retelling, with a cast of joyously hammy stereotypes.

Occasionally the kill cam opts to show us a wall, with the actual kill presumably happening behind it. And at the risk of sounding like the kind of disrespectful millennial scum who would fast-forward through a WW2 documentary to watch Celebrity Love Island, it would be nice if our units moved a *little* faster when they're in stealth mode. But these are minor nitpicks about what is an excellent debut.

This WW2-set XCOM-a-like is a really pleasant surprise and a massively confident first title from its developers. Let's hope we see a lot more from this studio. **Abbie Stone**

8
PLAY



Glitchy CRT graphics and a dreamy soundscape makes Balatro feel like '90s shareware in the best way.

Balatro

Become the poker Joker

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £12.99
ETA Out now
PUB Playstack
DEV LocalThunk
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 30-60 mins per avg run
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable game speed, screen shake, and CRT-like effects; switchable play/discard buttons, high-contrast cards toggle

Four of a kinds get a heck of a lot easier to pull off when you've loaded your deck with eight aces. Straight flushes become less luck-driven when you've converted as many cards as possible into duplicate hearts. Even the humble two pair can outplay other hands if you rewrite the scorecard and heap multipliers on top.

There are hundreds of ways to cheat the rules of poker in roguelike Balatro, but only the canniest of runs will see you snatching victory from the jaws of the biggest blinds. You've got to work your way through eight antes made up of three blinds, each one giving you a progressively higher score to reach by building poker hands from your cards. With a limit to the number you can lay down or discard to draw more, the pressure is on.

PLAY YOUR CARDS RIGHT

Money you earn through play can be used between rounds to boost your deck. Joker cards give (often) permanent rule changes, such as increasing your chip score per played face card, giving a higher multiplier for each card of a particular suit you discard, and many, many more. You're only able to keep five in play at once (though this, too, can be modified), but you'll often find ways to combine those cards to make them boost each other.

For example, what happens if a Joker that boosts face cards meets another that makes all cards behave as if they are face cards? Or if another that boosts its multiplier based on the resale value of your Joker cards meets one with a resale value that can be increased when it meets certain conditions? Hint: they both involve big score bonuses.

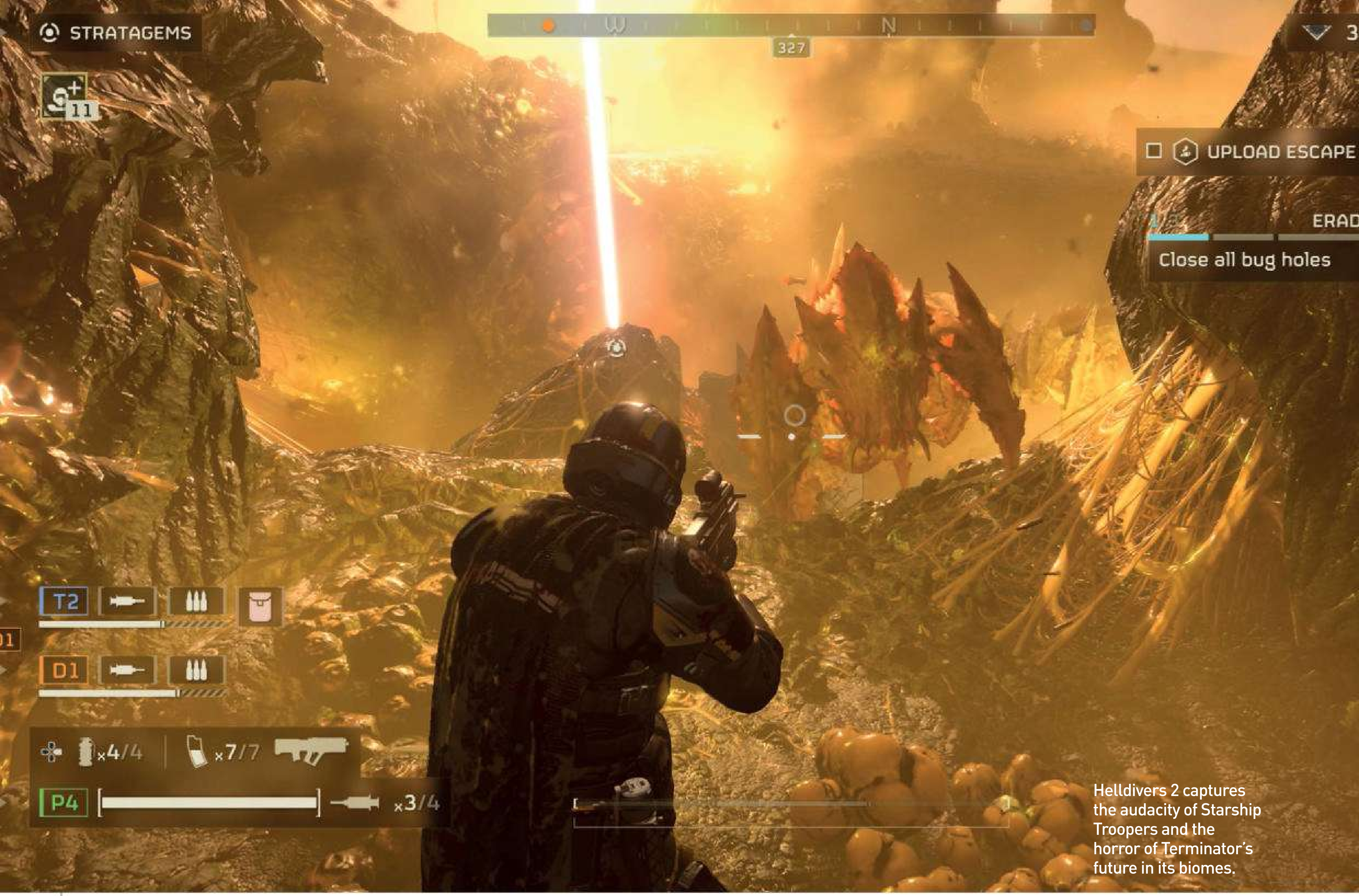
There's so much interplay between the cards that it feels like you're always stumbling upon fresh possibilities or chasing a new idea. These go beyond just the Jokers – there are planet cards that upgrade your hands so you might end up having pairs outscore full houses; tarot cards that can alter pre-existing cards by giving them special effects (like bonuses when you keep them in-hand, or changing their value), and just shoving new cards into your deck wholesale. Changes stay in your deck for the whole run, meaning you can end up with some chaotic card concoctions. But boss blinds have their own effects, such as disabling whole suits, meaning if you can't play around them or use skills to alter or disable those effects you may be in for it.

> Only the canniest of runs will see you snatching victory from the jaws of the biggest blinds.

Then there are endless runs, loads of additional cards to earn for completing challenges, and different starting decks to master (some may enable you to carry extra Jokers, others to play more hands at the cost of fewer discards). No matter what, you'll want to be dealt back in – we'd bet on it.

With easy-to-understand fundamentals, the possibilities every card has for interacting with others result in depth that makes you feel like a genius. Luck be a Joker! **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8
PLAY



Helldivers 2 captures the audacity of Starship Troopers and the horror of Terminator's future in its biomes.

Helldivers 2

This is an urgent communication from High Command

Citizen of Super Earth, it's time to heed the call to Galactic War. You'll fight for freedom! And for democracy! And you'll do it alongside three of your closest friends, battling in the dirt and the dust of the eastern regions of the universe, protecting outlying planets from an encroaching Terminid threat. Fighters who excel through basic training will be assigned duties throughout the western colonies, tearing down Automaton footholds.

The prize you receive in exchange for broken bones and spilled blood? Medals Of Valor to spend on gear and weapons, and research intelligence to go towards the development of more powerful additions to your orbital arsenal. If none of that sounds appealing, perhaps just experiencing the best co-operative action in decades is reward enough. Sony has finally found its first live-service success story thanks to indie outfit Arrowhead. The excellent foundations of the original Helldivers have been built on here with thought and purpose, which you feel all through its intertwining, intuitively-designed systems. The studio has improved the fundamentals of play in such a way that the spirit of the original experience hasn't just survived, but thrived, in the transition away from a top-down perspective.

Helldivers 2 has a solid, surprisingly economical core combat model – snappy third-person action dealt out in short, sharp shocks of violence. The camera clings tightly to your Helldiver, arching agonisingly as you jab frantically at the DualSense thumbsticks in an attempt to track monstrous, screen-dwarfing bugs across luscious procedurally-generated battlefields, the triggers whirring under your fingers as you pepper augmented humans and sentient machines with continuous hails of gunfire, ammunition so scarce that you don't dare risk a reload until your clip clicks dry. The controller shakes violently in your hands as you suffer impactful full-body blows – be it from a Terminid Charger crashing into you from behind, shattering your arms and legs, or a misplaced Stratagem from a fellow Helldiver. Orbital Strike landing in 3, 2, 1…

PS5
HELLDIVERS II

INFO

FORMAT PS5

PRICE £34.99

ETA Out now

PUB PlayStation Studios

DEV Arrowhead Game Studios

PLAYERS 1-4 (with crossplay)

LENGTH N/A

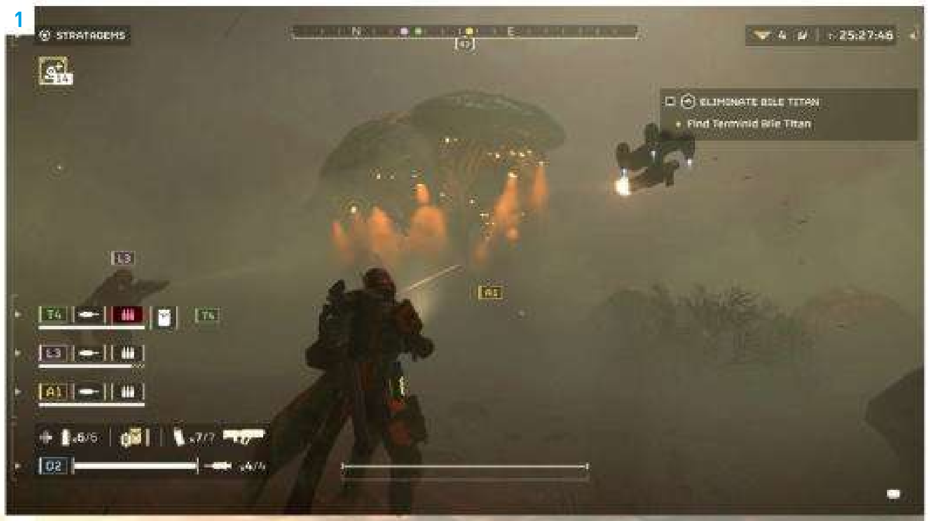
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles (adjustable size); adjustable reticule size/colour; text-to-speech/speech-to-text

DOING YOUR PART?

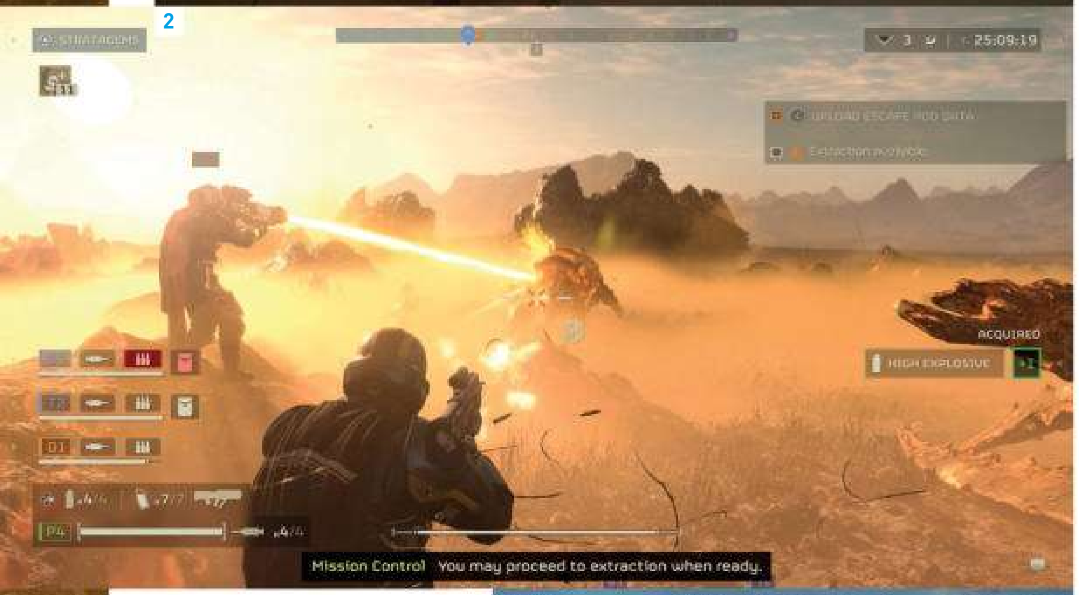
It's really difficult to make friendly fire work in online multiplayer games. There's a reason it's seldom seen outside of more forthright simulations – the ability to physically accost a teammate in the heat of battle is open to abuse, and generates points of friction. Until a developer gets it right, that is. The chaos and confusion of the large battles here only generate slapstick delight and laughter as blasting goes awry. The moments you'll remember? When you're sprinting away from a wave of enemies and accidentally careen into a buddy, realising too late that they were

> Has a live-service model that feels more befitting of the PS3 era – that's a compliment.

1

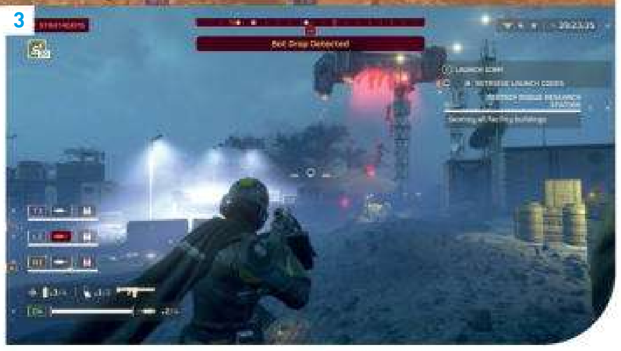


2



Mission Control You may proceed to extraction when ready.

3

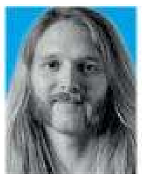


1 You have to physically punch Stratagems in via the D-pad to activate them. **2** Friendly fire is an ever-present threat. **3** Arrowhead knows precisely when to pump the brakes and when to press on the gas with its enemy numbers.

priming a grenade – the pair of you staring in stunned silence as it drops from their hand to beneath your feet, your other two teammates celebrating that the blast wiped out 30 of the creatures, and the entire group subsequently arguing about the number of respawns remaining.

We still have questions about how Helldivers 2 will operate in the long run. The service-based structure of the overarching Galactic War lacks variety in mission design, and there are precious few gear options to equip so far. The flip side to this is that pleasingly few opportunities have been taken to monetise the core experience, with no traditional battle pass or pay-to-win elements in sight. Helldivers 2 is pleasingly stripped back in this way, feeling removed from the battle royale and loot-shooter fever which has swept the shooter genre in recent years. Helldivers 2 has a live-service model that feels more befitting of the PS3 era – and that's a compliment of the highest order.

Helldivers 2 is a delight. A stressful, challenging, absolutely antagonistic delight that we'll no doubt be playing for months (if not years) to come. Arrowhead has established the foundations for a truly special shooter, showing an unwavering confidence in its creative concept and exceptional quality in its execution. It's a bit of a rough ride if you're rolling solo (or relying on matchmaking) but this is a dream come true for friend groups looking for their next co-op obsession.

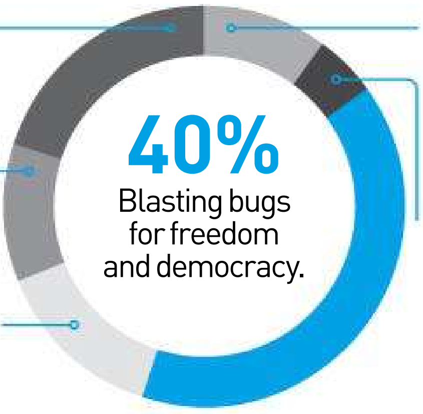


A frantic co-op shooter that offers an unrelenting challenge. This chaos generator will delight friend groups who enjoy being pushed to the brink of failure. **Josh West**

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: HELLDIVERS 2



20% Getting stomped by Automatons.

11% Arguing over respawns. Get us back in the fight!

14% Jumping right back in for another mission. Super Earth won't protect itself.

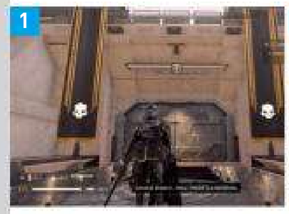
40% Blasting bugs for freedom and democracy.

10% Calling in an orbital strike to blast the legions away...

5% ...and failing to get yourself and the squad away from the blast in time.

THE FIRST THREE HOURS

1



2

3

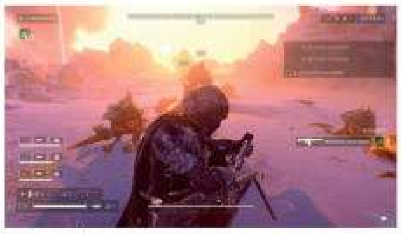
1 You'll run through Basic Training, learning how to shoot before arriving on your Super Destroyer. **2** You and your pals will spend at least an hour making Starship Troopers jokes as you battle on Terminid infested-planets. **3** As the challenge ramps up, those Starship Troopers jokes are replaced by blind panic.

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

DUALSENSE SPEAKER
Communication is key, so there's no excuse for not talking if your headset runs out of battery.

HAPTIC FEEDBACK
You'll feel every single slash and crash in your fingertips, making those friendly-fire hits all the more painful.

LOVING/HATING



LOSS AND LOAD
We love the way forcing a reload expends the rest of the ammunition in the clip. Makes us think before going ahead.

ACQUISITION CENTRE

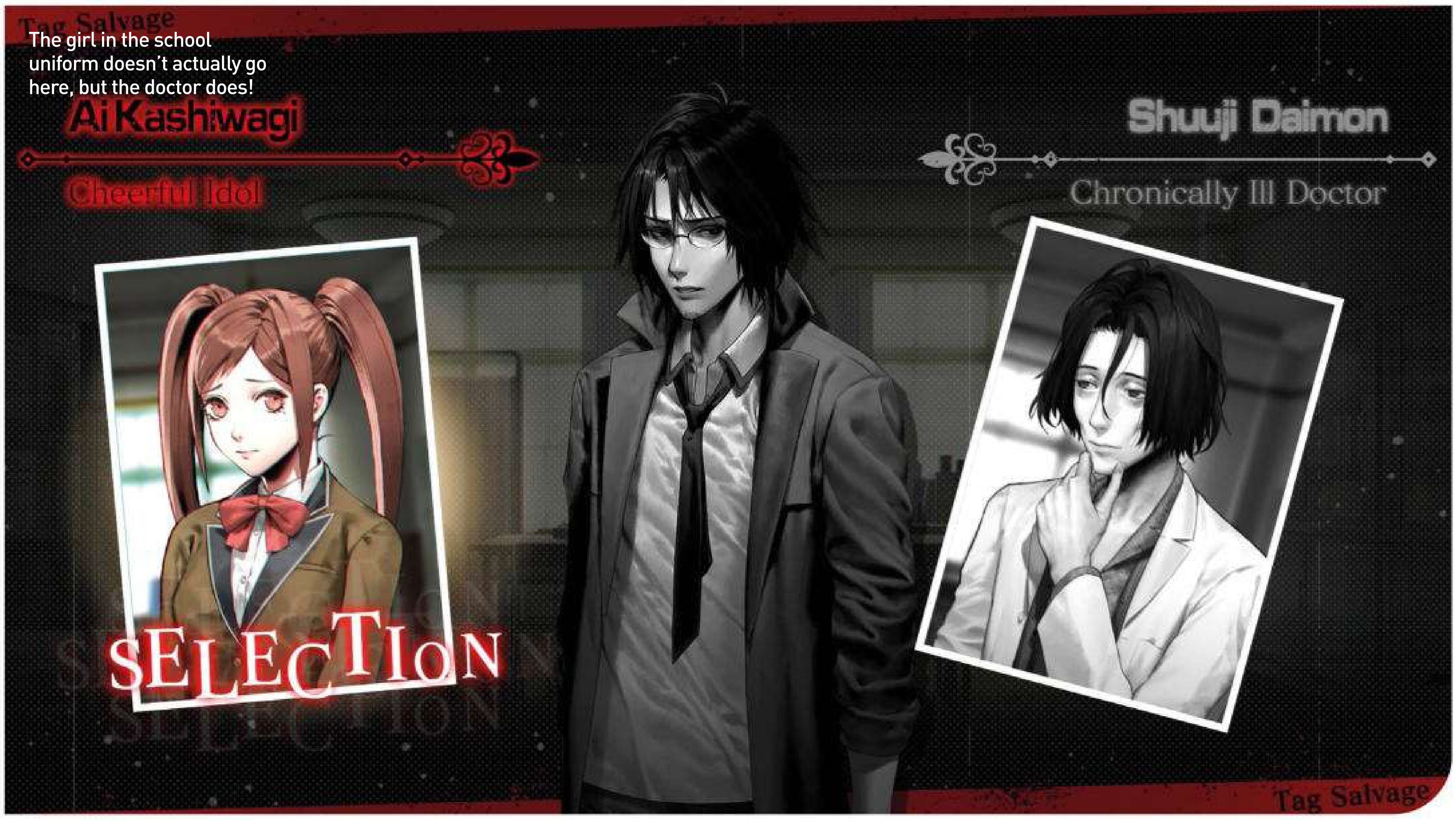
TAKE OUR MONEY!
Okay, we often grumble about microtransactions, but for once it's a crying shame that there's little on offer in the storefront.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES
The switch from top-down to third-person action has imbued the Helldivers experience with more lethality.

YES
While Borderlands 3 is one of the best co-op FPSs, Helldivers 2 generates a different style of chaos.

YES
Helldivers 2 better captures the Left 4 Dead spirit than spiritual followup Back 4 Blood.



The girl in the school uniform doesn't actually go here, but the doctor does!

Spirit Hunter: Death Mark II

Probability is the probable cause of death here

PS5
DEATH MARK

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £44.99
ETA Out now
PUB Aksys Games
DEV Experience
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 11+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY N/A

Konoehara Academy is haunted and it's up to the returning protagonist from the first Death Mark to sort it out, because another guy from first game gave the headmaster a glowing reference for him, along the lines of 'Yeah, he can sort that ghost for you.' A job's a job. And if you don't, people will die – not a good look for the school.

Death Mark II is perfectly playable if you're unfamiliar with the first game or spinoff Spirit Hunter: NG, although the chance to meet recurring characters may increase the appeal for returning ghost hunters. The other Mark Bearers from the first instalment fill out most of the supporting cast, but beyond that it's a new case with new ghosties.

Even though we're now three entries deep into the series, the way the story's told can still feel clunky, as can the mechanics that break up the vast amounts of reading. That said, the variation does bring a nice level of interaction to this game; exploring and searching for clues makes it feel less like a straightforward visual novel. Think Ace Attorney, but evil.

The influence of Japanese folklore and urban legends on the string of spectres plaguing the school results in some interesting ghosts, but they frequently end up feeling shoehorned in for the sake of a point of reference rather than adding much to the story. The fact the first ghost is a girl called Hanako, which school gossip links to the 'Hanako Of The Toilet' urban legend, is fun, but the integration of these popular myths into the story feels sloppier from the second case onwards.

A SPIRITED ATTEMPT

Despite that, the developer does a great job of creating a creepy atmosphere, boosted by a tense battle-like system that uses the evidence you've collected to save your hide. In these 'Suspensive Acts', you use knowledge and items gained while exploring to avoid becoming a ghost's latest victim through multiple choice. This is combined with a percentage chance mechanic, so it becomes somewhat 'roll not to die to ghost,' with some hits to the HP that increase the uncertainty of whether you'll be seeing game over. If you choose incorrectly, a character might end up flapping notebook pages at a spirit in the hope that they can read it. Even if you choose correctly, you can fall prey to a 20% chance of failing to open a jar. Realistic, if a little brutal.

> Exploring and searching for clues makes it feel less like a straightforward visual novel.

You can level up and collect items to improve your chances by dragging your chosen partner character for that chapter around the school searching for teeth. It's a fun idea, if ultimately underused and bit unpolished – something which could be said of most of Death Mark II, though it's all so strange we can't look away, or keep from pushing further.

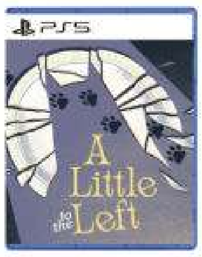
We'd hoped the series would be more polished by now, yet this short stint of horror sleuthery will still appeal if you're seeking the macabre and unusual. **Max Williams**

7
PLAY

Even the most elegant plans to organise seldom survive real-life contact. This puzzler is all about making peace with life's chaos.

A Little To The Left

Ah, the cat's got into this puzzler



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £11.99
ETA Out now
PUB Secret Mode
DEV Max Inferno
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 3 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Volume sliders for music and sound effects; cursor sensitivity presets; cursor assist available; tap to hold, controller vibration, and wiggle effect on/off

From arranging books on a shelf in a pleasing fashion to lining up Tupperware, this puzzler is all about delivering the simple pleasure of making order out of chaos. However, working the life-changing magic of tidying up is rarely simple. As you sort letters, envelopes, and Post-its into pleasing piles, your attempts to organise are often thwarted by the curious paws of a furry friend.

There's a soothingly mellow colour palette, and every tidying task is manageably to the point – ah, the dream! But living a life is a messy business, and there's an attempt here through low-stakes puzzle design to reach towards a zen sense of 'it is what it is.' If one puzzle is causing more frustration than it's worth, you can even select 'Let it be' from the pause menu to move on to the next clutter conundrum.

The cat haunts your attempts to set your surroundings straight, becoming the perfect mascot for the treadmill of tidying up. Feline interference eventually becomes unavoidable, but rather than make this pawed presence a defeatable force, A Little To The Left ends on a more celebratory note. Besides, what's the point of caring for a space if there's no room for life to be lived in it?

STORAGE WARS

But having spent a great deal of time battling the real-life forces of clutter, there are a few reasons the whole thing makes our skin prickle. To begin with, some puzzles can be solved in multiple ways, though not all of them. Often you won't know what kind of problem you're facing until you've solved it, and because the design is so sleek, there's not always a lot to clue you into how you should approach a puzzling pile. A subtle chime indicates you're not barking up the wrong tree with your placements, but there's little feedback when you've got it wrong – or even not all the way right.

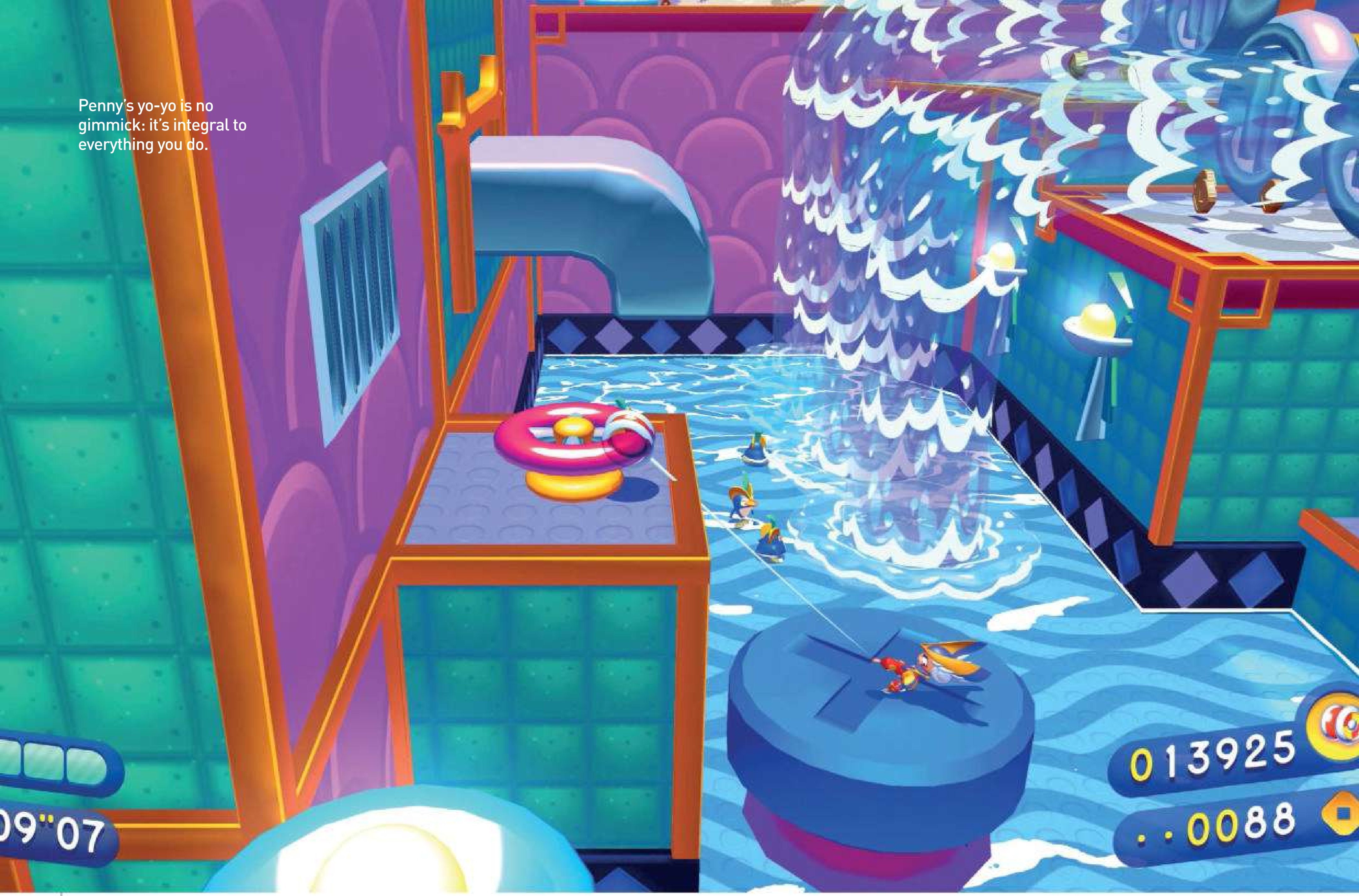
> Your attempts to organise are often thwarted by the curious paws of a furry friend.

Broader hints are presented in a novel manner from the pause menu, with intended solutions hidden by an obscuring layer of pencil scrawls. It's up to you to erase these scribbles and choose just how much of the solution you'd like to reveal. It's a neat touch, but a bit inelegant when all you really want is an idea of just *how* creative you should get with your stacking.

The actual act of turning your hand to ordering chaos can feel fiddly too; there's an imprecision to your grabby cursor that is slight but no less aggravating, even though no solution requires you to place something with pixel-perfect precision. Cursor speed is adjustable but, despite Team PLAY's obvious loyalties, we find ourselves wishing we were playing on a touchscreen. Stumbling blocks like this threaten throughout to swipe away the chill vibes.

A sleekly presented, satisfying selection of sorting and stacking puzzles is let down by stressful wobbles. Still, this cat sparks joy more often than not. **Jess Kinghorn**

7
PLAY


Penny's yo-yo is no gimmick: it's integral to everything you do.

Penny's Big Breakaway

Spin it to win it

Throwbacks to platformers of old are plentiful. Evening Star, the developer of this one, was responsible for Sonic Mania. But while Penny's Big Breakaway, the studio's debut original 3D platformer, piles on the nostalgia, what's unique is how fresh every leap and flick of the yo-yo feels. Derivative? Hardly; you haven't seen tricks like these before.

Street performer Penny hopes to ace the audition to become the kingdom's new palace entertainer. But as she swings her way through the tutorial, a chance meeting with a cosmic string not only enhances her yo-yo, it means the toy bites off more than it can chew. After it munches on the king's clothing, reducing him to his underoos in front of the masses, Penny is hunted by the kingdom's penguin security forces. Plenty of reason to run through levels at pace, as our heroine uses her yo-yo to escape and discover the truth behind her stellar upgrade.

TIME CAPSULE

Embracing a '90s aesthetic, every area features clashing colours and vapourwave designs, mixed with a blippy, scratchy, and dreamy soundtrack (featuring retro-style OST veterans like Tee Lopes, Christian Whitehead, and Sean Bialo). These are pleasing worlds to get lost in, and the cartoon style also makes the obstacles ahead readable.

INFO

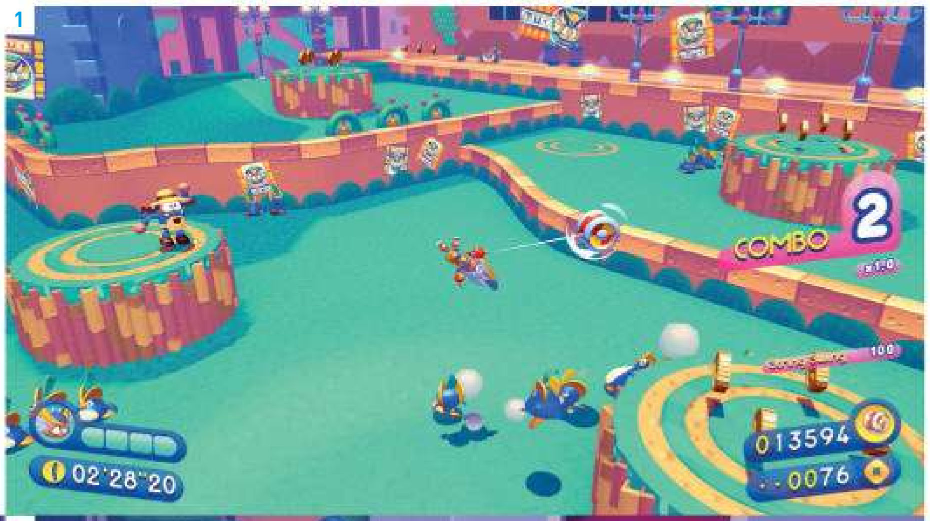
FORMAT PS5
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Private Division
DEV Evening Star
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 6+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Screen shake toggle; simple-only controls; multiple language options

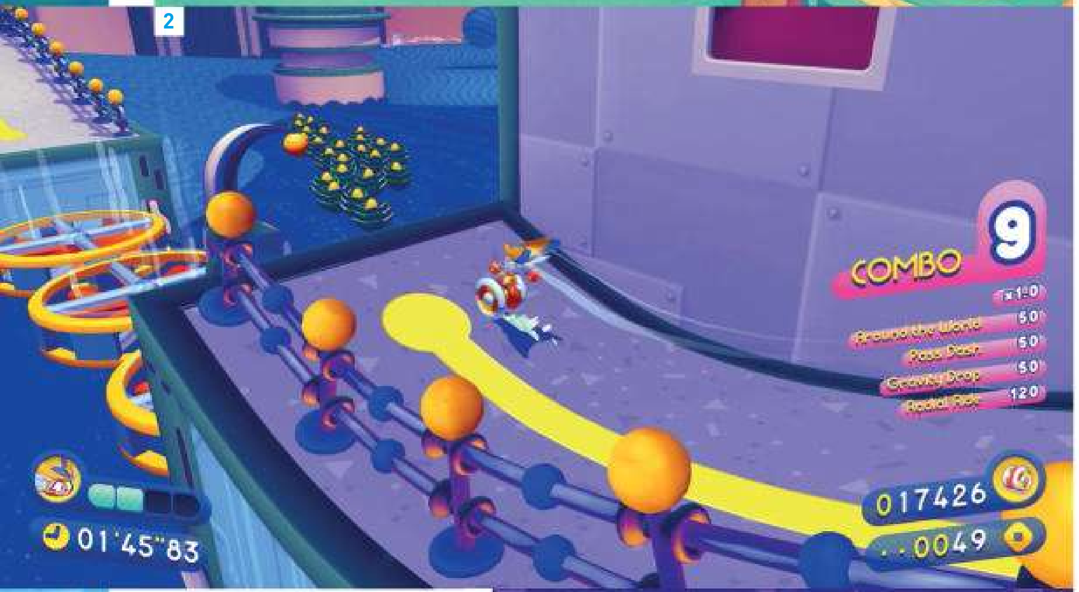
While obviously gamey in its design, each zone is inhabited by low-poly characters with things to say, making these bizarre lands of jumps and hazards feel lived-in. Each stage has three people asking for help – they give you mini-quests to complete while blasting through the level. These are as simple as scooping up a handful of items on the path ahead or racking up your score by mixing up your special jumps, but do keep things varied (as do other hidden collectibles). You don't have to take them on, just like you don't have to set a high score time, but both options add spice to going from A to B.

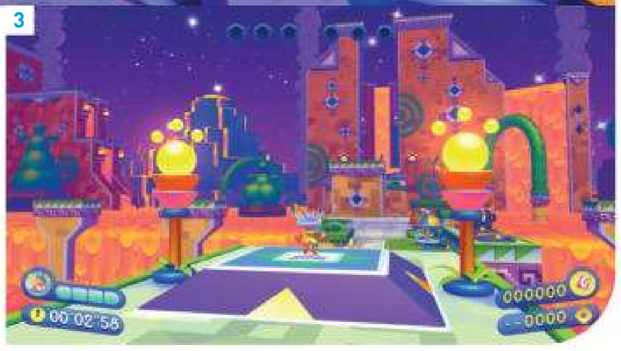
YO-TON-YO

While Penny's momentum-based movement pinches a ring from Sonic's special zone, the application feels like little else thanks to her yo-yo. Her spinny companion allows for no fewer than three types of double jump: a standard extra tap of ⊗ allows an extra spin up into the air; pressing ⊡ pauses you briefly in the air, allowing you to whip out an attack straight ahead; pressing ⊡ again zips Penny to that point and off ahead; holding ⊡, meanwhile, keeps the yo-yo in place, Penny spinning on it based on her speed before flinging herself off when you let go. All can be used together once before you touch the ground. Hold ◎ on your way down, and she'll get onto the yo-yo to ride it, slopes adding to her speed and half-pipes flinging her into the air.

The momentum-based movement feels like little else thanks to Penny's yo-yo.







1 Fling yourself every which way to evade those pesky penguins. **2** Build momentum to roll further and hurl yourself great distances. **3** Curvy 3D models, cartoon cutscenes, and crayon-like draw distances combine to look fab.

Yo-yo power-ups feel less integral, being brief abilities that alter your movement for a platforming section ahead, though they do add variety.

Pro controls allow for further mastery. The right stick enables you to aim the yo-yo for jumps around Penny, and you can map jumps and riding to the triggers. That does also mean the camera is fixed – but for the most part, this works well, though it can take a while to get used to throwing out the yo-yo correctly this way. You can use both sets of controls at once, so there's no need to commit completely to using one or the other.

Each stage is designed around these moves to ensure you're constantly moving. Slopes help you build up speed, poles jut out to spin from, water requires you to build momentum to skip across waves, paths fork to allow you to roll down your own routes, and penguins leap at you to pin you down (bust moves to shake them off, because if five grab hold of you, you'll be sent back to a checkpoint). World-specific gimmicks add to this, from obligatory ice platforms in Pengoville to more out-there obstacles like the tilting frying pans suspended over lava in the food-themed Moltobene or Bubblin's diving boards that pinball-flick you skyward.

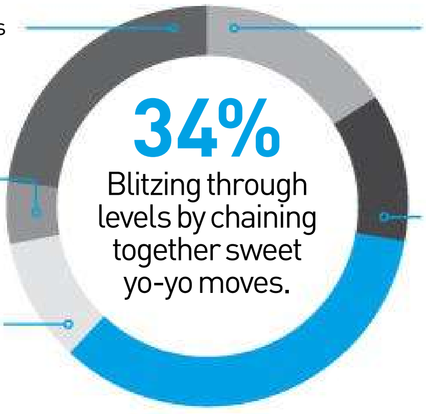
Penny's Big Breakaway manages both to go big and go home, with a joyous world that's glee-inducing to move through. While the movement can take a moment to grok, even for retro-heads, its new language soon feels natural. Neat trick.

A throwback platformer that feels innovative rather than derivative, Penny's world and joyous movement is infectious. You'll be back for another spin. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: PBB



23% Dodging hordes of penguins as they relentlessly hunt you down.

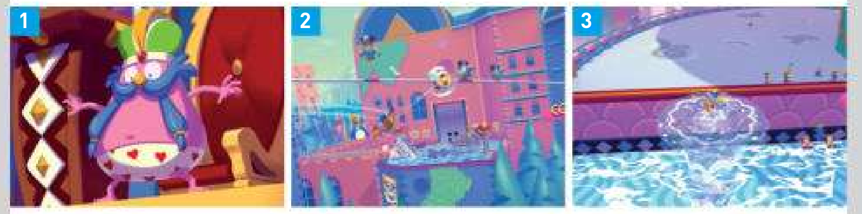
5% Enjoying the fun dialogue of the world's inhabitants.

10% Overzealously snapping yourself to the yo-yo and off the edge.

16% Lending a helping hand by finding many, many lost objects.

12% Diving into a yo-yo spin just right and flinging yourself back up.

THE FIRST THREE HOURS



1 Forget the Emperor's New Clothes, get this king a curtain, a red carpet – anything to cover him up! **2** Penny's yo-yo-aided movement is snappy, but we keep accidentally falling off ledges. Argh! **3** Ah, *now* we get it. Rolling, soaring, flinging ourselves through the next stages, Penny's traversal is like nothing else.

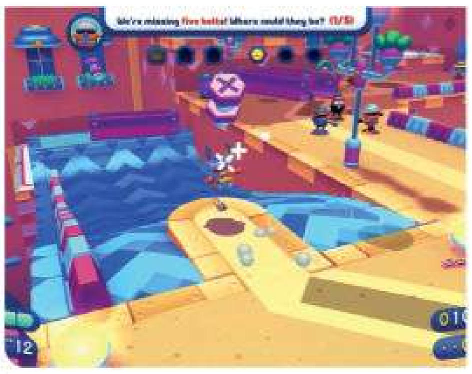
STATPACK

08
Bosses, not all penguins, and some of them pretty irritating to fight. (Though, we have to admit, that's in true classic platformer fashion).

11
Worlds, with a varying number of levels each (plus Star Globe bonus stages). They're all colourful and fun, and none outstay their welcome.

03
Different types of jump to master, from zips to twirls. Learn them all to master movement and race through the levels at top speed!

HOW TO… COMPLETE DILEMMAS



Helping citizens will give you a bigger bonus. There are three in each stage – pass them by to take on their task (such as finding missing items or escorting an object) as an objective. There are no clunky quest turn-ins; when you're done, you're done, so you can focus on staying on the move.

TROPHY CABINET

READY SET YO!

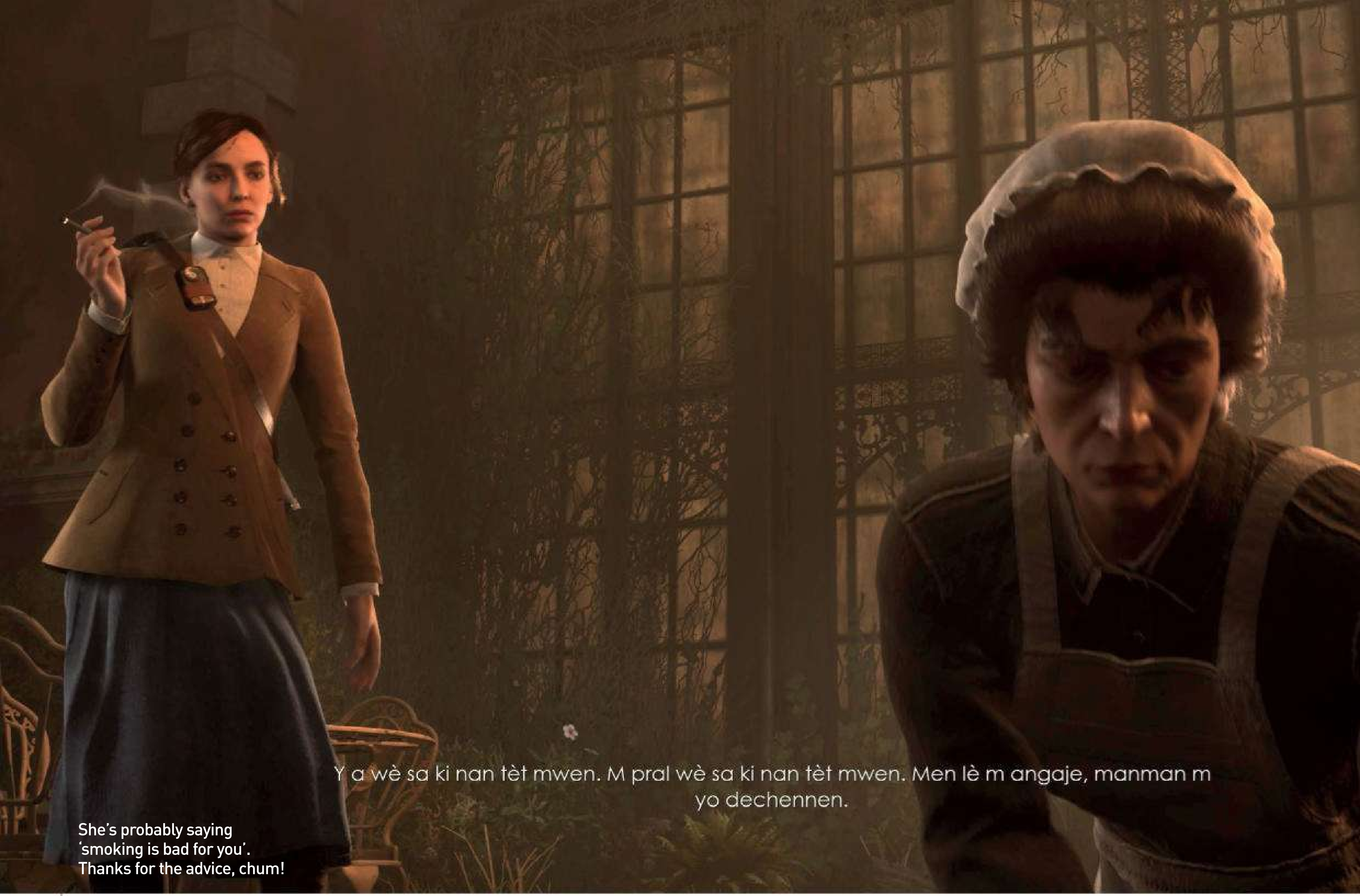
BRONZE
Successfully flee from the huge Penguinball that comes after you in the first world.

HUNDO CLUB

SILVER
Keep a combo going into triple digits by chaining your yo-yo moves together.

REACH FOR THE STARS

GOLD
Clear all the fiendish Star Globe challenge levels and you'll have earned this one.



Y a wè sa ki nan tèt mwen. M pral wè sa ki nan tèt mwen. Men lè m angaje, manman m yo dechennen.

She's probably saying 'smoking is bad for you'. Thanks for the advice, chum!

Alone In The Dark

Needs more bright ideas

Could this be the most rebooted series in gaming? We've had New Nightmare on PS2, a mess of a reboot on PS3, and the legendarily awful Alone In The Dark: Illumination that was thankfully confined solely to PC. Now we have this, the fourth attempt to resurrect one of the originators of survival horror. If only there were a series with themes about the dangers of resurrecting forces which should stay buried that could warn publishers to stay away, eh?

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £49.99
ETA Out now
PUB THQ Nordic
DEV Pieces Interactive
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 8+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable motion blur and camera sensitivity; subtitles; togglable button mash

Playing as either Emily Hartwood (played by Jodie Comer) or Edward Carnby (David Harbour), you're searching for Emily's uncle Jeremy at Derceto Manor, where he's apparently been suffering from terrifying hallucinations. Might we diagnose he enjoy a little less Resident Evil before bed? Because this plays like a tribute to Capcom's excellent remake of Resident Evil 2. It's got a main location that you gradually open up, loving close-ups of keys opening doors, gun sights that narrow when you stop moving, a rubbish sewer level, and even the starter enemies remind us of the Molded from Resident Evil VII.

BRAAAAAIIINS!

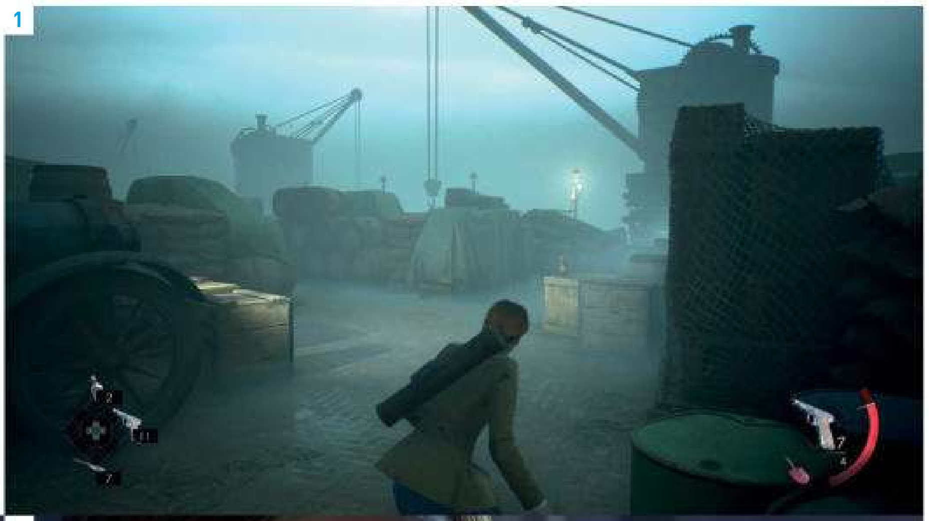
There are certainly worse games to be inspired by, and you'll have a good, spooky time steadily unlocking the manor. Often the puzzle design is excellent and admirably hands-off. Books have to be read carefully for clues, and we need to break out the pen and paper more than once to decipher certain solutions. It's great to see a game that's confident enough to block off your progress until you've properly figured something out. No bizarre adventure game logic here either.

Still, you're probably not considering buying something called Alone In The Dark for the brainteasers. You're here in the hope of being scared and, sadly, this is where the game's derivativeness starts to let it down. It's certainly effective at making you jump, and there are some nasty spidery things that will have arachnophobes tearfully uninstalling the game, but we've seen all its tricks before. Heard the one about the blind monster that you need to stealth your way past? The sound design is excellent and those sequences are certainly tense, but it's a horror gaming trope as old as time.

We long for something to shake up the familiar formula, just as the Resi 2 remake was given a jolt of energy by Mr X stalking us through its police station. Well, it turns out we should be careful what we wish for, as the chase sequences here make us want to flee the game entirely. There's an infuriating glitch wherein you get permanently stuck on scenery that forces us to reload several times during our time with the

> We have this, the fourth attempt to resurrect one of the originators of survival horror.

1



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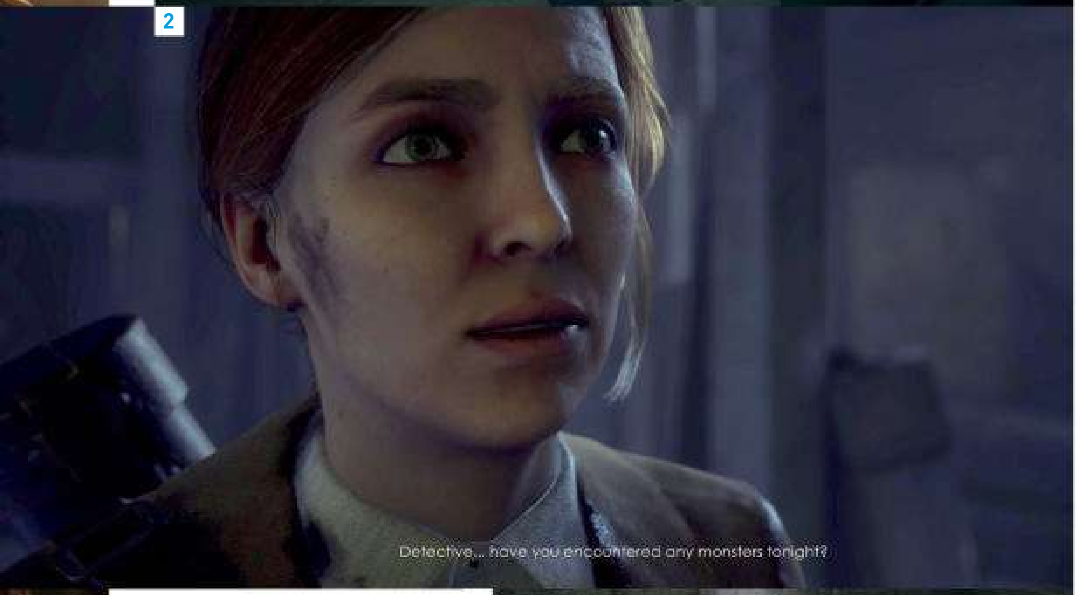

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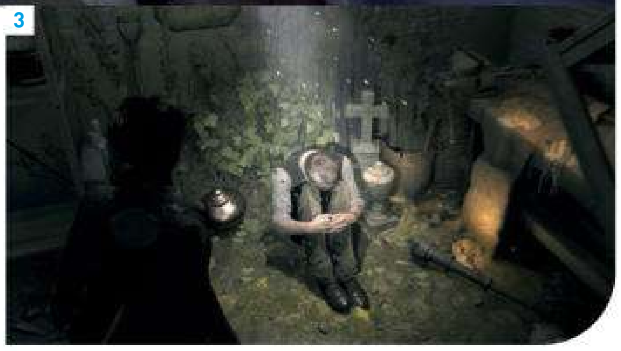


1 Not everything's nicked from Resi – it was nice of the town of Silent Hill to loan the game this foggy dock. **2** When even Villanelle can't hold her own, you know things are getting bleak. **3** Oh come on, buddy, the game isn't *that* scary.

game. You're encouraged to sneak past monsters by lobbing bottles to distract them, something that we've been asked to do in about seven million games already. Mess up the stealth and it's unlikely you'll be too worried as there's nothing truly horrifying to fight, bar perhaps a beast the game saves for the very end.

HORRIBLY FAMILIAR

It's a shame, because this is definitely not a cheap-and-cheerful production. The manor looks gorgeous, the jazzy soundtrack creates a sublime atmosphere, and it's really hard to hate a game that lets you play as the 1992 pixel-tastic versions of the characters (actually, the fact that was a preorder bonus makes it a lot easier to hate).

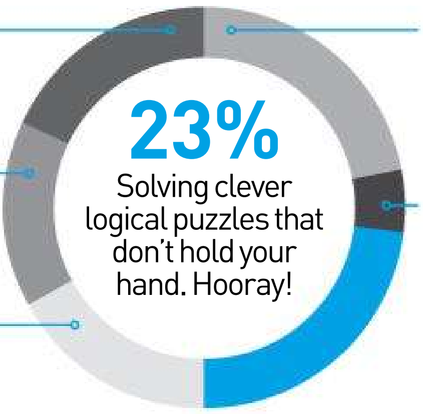
The plot is intriguing, if never quite compelling enough to grip us completely. Collectable trinkets that add further insights, plus unique cutscenes and storylines for each celebrity-acted protagonist, just about justify a replay, though it's a shame the narrative cheats a bit here. Whichever character you don't play as claims to not be experiencing any of the supernatural elements. We would have loved it if one of the campaigns had committed to this idea rather than just playing disappointingly near-identically. And that's this latest retelling of Alone In The Dark in a nutshell: nicely executed, but lacking that killer hook that can take it all the way to the survival horror big leagues. Best of luck to the next reboot in 2030.

When it comes to horror games, you could do a lot worse than this, but you could also do a lot better. Its great puzzles belong in a much better game. **Abbie Stone**

6
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: ALONE IN THE DARK



18% Reading the loooooong (but well-written!) books you find.

15% Throwing bottles to distract enemies. Yawn.

17% Swearing because a jump scare got you.

22% Wandering around trying to find somewhere you haven't explored yet.

5% Sighing and reloading because you got caught on the scenery.

HOW TO… SURVIVE COMBAT

Pistol ammo may seem generous, but that's only because the game is fond of trapping you in fights that use all of it. Use melee weapons when you can – they break easily, but you'll want to swap them whenever you find a new one anyway. Spam dodge on ◎ whenever anything nasty is close!

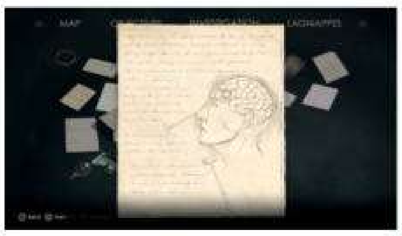
FRIENDS & ENEMIES

CASSANDRA BEAUREGARD
Blasé about the horrors, she'd rather enjoy another drink.

JEREMY HARTWOOD
Saddled with mental health issues *and* a bewildering accent.

GRACE SAUNDERS
This girl who seems wise beyond her years is one of the more intriguing mysteries.

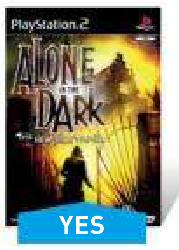
LOVING/HATING



BRILLIANT MIND
Oooh a lobotomy guide! Some of the notes for puzzles are wonderfully macabre. Perhaps a more puzzle-focussed sequel?

MINDLESS VIOLENCE
Entering an area full of throwable bottles. Why not just put a big sign up saying 'SURPRISE COMBAT ENCOUNTER INCOMING'?

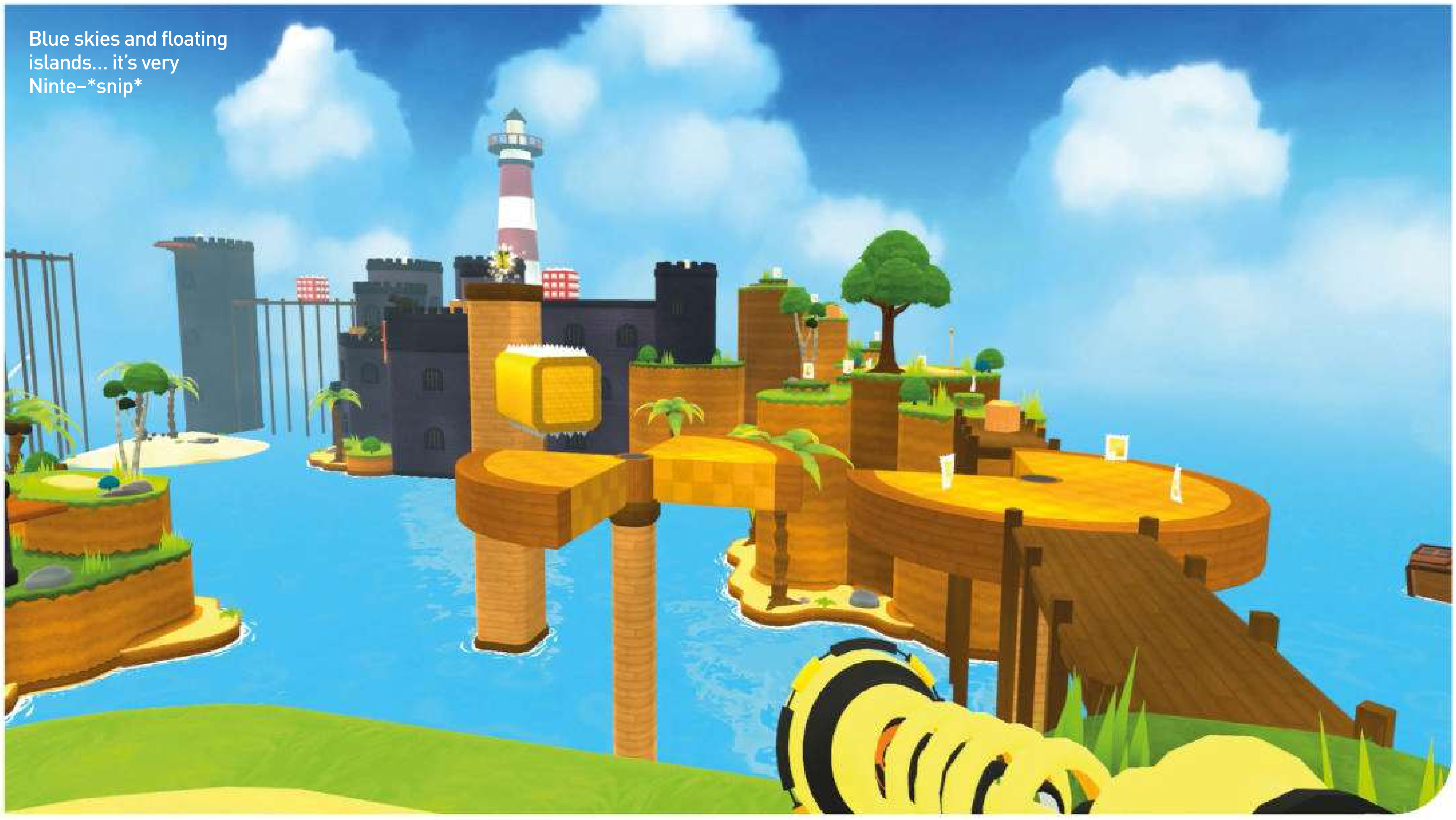
IS IT BETTER THAN?



YES
AITD: The New Nightmare has its moments. Annoying enemies keep it from reaching Resi heights.

NO
Resi 2's remake reminded us that third-person survival horror could still rock, and Mr X still terrify.

YES
AITD: Inferno is the best version of this reboot, but it's still an overambitious train wreck.



Blue skies and floating islands… it's very Ninte-*snip*

Stilt

A hopportunity for some silly fun

INFO

FORMAT PSVR2
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB VRKiwi
DEV Rekt Gamesf
PLAYERS 1 (8 online)
LENGTH N/A
ACCESSIBILITY Head collision and snap turning on/off; adjustable smooth turning speed; adjustable tunnelling

Games that make you jump for joy, fall head over heels, or feel like you're on top of the world are rare, and it's even rarer that we get to write lines like these and mean every word – literally *and* metaphorically.

Stilt has a retro feel, despite running on the latest tech. This VR platformer feels like the lost sequel to PS1's Jumping Flash, a similarly kooky concept that saw you bound across floating platforms, your huge robo-rabbit feet occasionally intruding into the bottom of the screen. But Stilt takes the idea and runs, well… jumps, with it. Your arms become legs with springs, and a forceful downward push and flick of the wrist bounces you skywards.

The simple controls become surprisingly complex when physics take hold – the more forceful your swing, the longer the jump. Short dabs downward result in little hops, while straightening your 'legs' as you land nulls the force of the leap, and you can walk by pounding one leggy-arm in front of the other.

SPRING INTO ACTION

The unique controls are pinned to a simple platform game structure where you hop about an overworld collecting stamps. You're also able to access one of 20 themed levels – complete with large sprawls of floating islands, bouncing meanies, rolling spiked dice, crumbling platforms, and tilting seesaw bridges – to collect 'presents'; find enough and the next stage of the overworld opens up. Such a simple structure is welcome as it allows the gameplay to shine. Your attention is dedicated to mastering the leg-jumps, controlling bounces, and overcoming some horribly addictive maps and obstacles. You can collect power-ups too; these turn your 'legs' into a cannons, vines for swinging, and propellers to guide jumps.

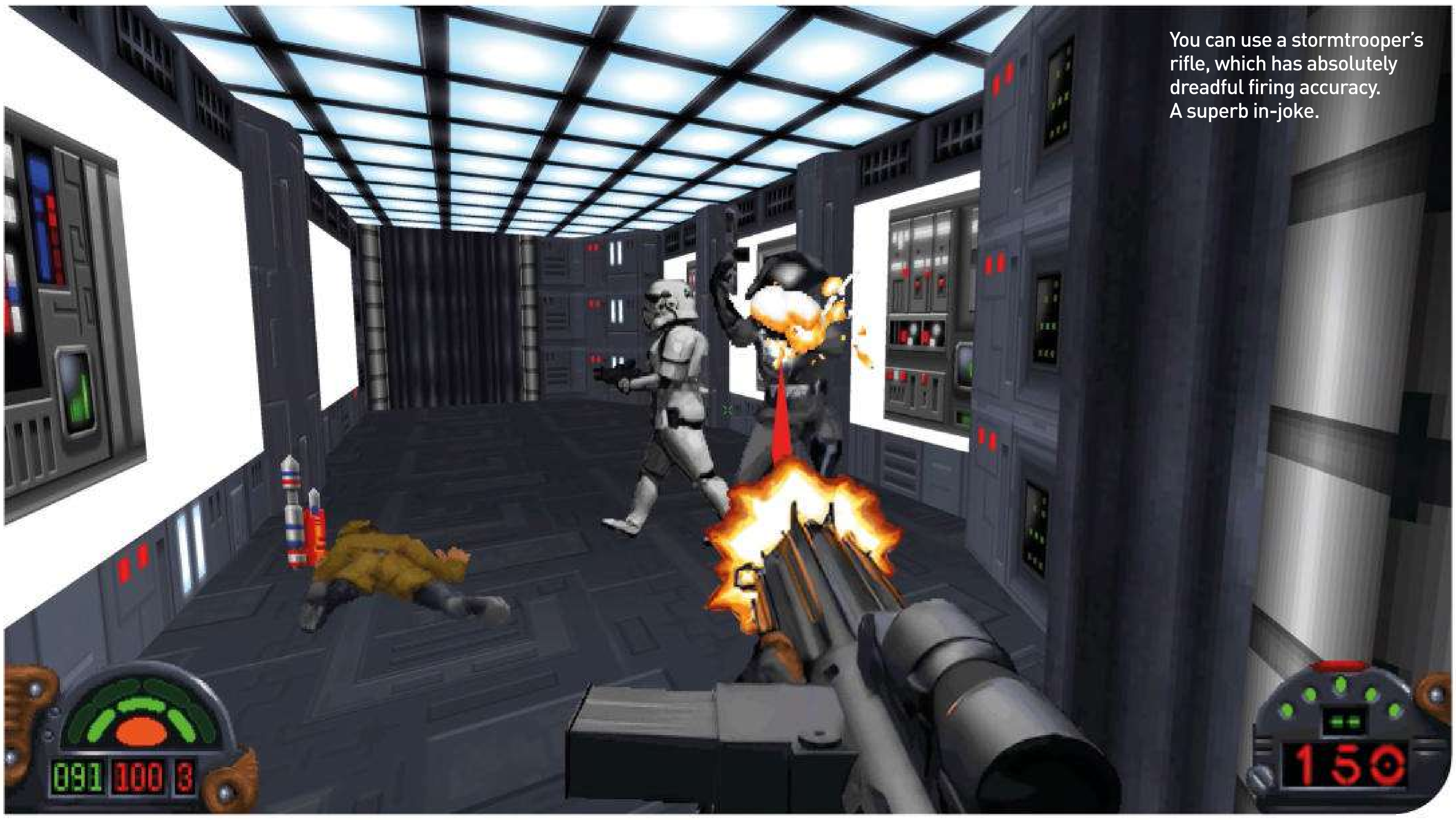
> Your arms become legs with springs, and a forceful downward push bounces you skywards.

In a similar fashion, the visuals are *basic* but crisp and colourful, leaving you to focus on plotting a path. The bold style helps to sell the cartoon world but also smooths the framerate and limits light sources, and so dispels any motion sickness you'd think a VR bouncing simulator would suffer from.

Stilt does have its shortfalls (sorry) as randomness and a little flakiness – in the controls, physics, and inherent in the nature of being in first-person – seep in and water down the joy. You'll bounce off rocks and fall to a death countless times, or get stuck in a corner staring at a wall, or pinball between objects and (again) fall to an untimely death. Yet the essential idea is so simple and the concept perfectly pitched that you *will* get back on those springs and be hopping again. When it works Stilt is pure fun, yet when it misses it's forgivable, just like an old robotic rabbity PS1 game that remains a cult classic.

Stilt is simple but innovative fun that can be both wildly rewarding and frustratingly random, often veering from one to the other in the blink of an eye. **Ian Dean**

8
PLAY



You can use a stormtrooper's rifle, which has absolutely dreadful firing accuracy. A superb in-joke.

Star Wars: Dark Forces Remaster

The first-ever Star Wars FPS gets the remaster treatment

PS5
DARK FORCES

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £24.49
ETA Out now
PUB Night Dive Studios
DEV Night Dive Studios, Lucasfilm Games
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; toggles for HUD, weapon flashing, head bob

Think classic Doom, only in a Star Wars setting so you're shooting stormtroopers. Yep, big smile. Now make that old-school vision super-crisp and smooth. Sounds perfect, doesn't it? This offering is even the predecessor to all-time classic Jedi Knight, so we're talking about a major piece of history made shiny and new again. But what's that lurking in the dark, salivating and belching like Jabba The Hut? It's (whisper it) *1995*. It's a trap!

Let's get one thing clear: the remastering is excellent, with a smooth framerate, enhanced sprites, and the now-usual ability to go back to the old, low-res, software-rendered visuals. But the game itself is unchanged. PS1 had 2MB of RAM, so creating large, detailed 3D levels was impossible. Of course, developers were tempted to try anyway, copying and pasting a single texture over and over to create an icy mountainside or city scene. In its low-res incarnation such uniformity was passable, but it's painfully basic when cleaned up today.

It's a shame because the new pad controls feel great. It's fast, snappy, and solid. It plays more like Duke Nukem 3D than Doom, which is impressive considering this predated Duke's 1996 mega-hit. You can look up and down and the levels are unprecedentedly tall and comparatively complex. But this complexity stretches the game's few assets to breaking point, leaving you poking about in triangular crags looking for switches. Or (shudder) keycards.

BATH VAPOUR

You spend way, *way* too much time scouring emptied levels for a way to open a new path. As the crude MIDI timpani and woodwind start to grate, so does the game. It's just not fun. Only the last two levels of the 14 available approach 'fun' status, with the rest comprising environmental puzzles stretched so thin they're like clingfilm, wrapped over stale titbits of Doom's gunplay to elongate the brief runtime. And no weapon here comes close to Doom's shotgun for satisfaction. Even with the padding, you'll have a platinum trophy in about ten hours, unless you get really stuck in the mine. Or the rotating bridge room. Or the Imperial City. Or the… *blaster shot*

There are some basic extras, including development screenshots and a playable demo originally built for the CES trade show. Ironically, this foregoes the sprawling vistas of the game proper in favour of close-quarters corridor blasting – more like Doom, or indeed the films' most memorable shootouts. You can imagine the excitement back then. Adding Star Wars to Doom was the stuff of fantasy. But instead of delivering that dream, Dark Forces combines the worst of everything 1995 had to offer, now exposed by extreme fidelity. It's aged like milk.

A commendable remaster of an ambitious game. But we've come so far in nearly 30 years, it's dreadful by today's standards. Not the shooter you're looking for. **Justin Towell**

4
PLAY

W2K24
Please
Don't try this at home.

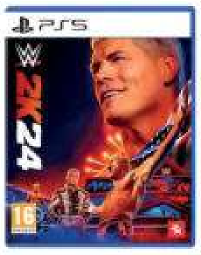
Your MyRise quest for the vacated world title may sound formulaic, but there are plenty of cool twists.

WWE 2K24

Rock solid, yet wrestling itself into an annual headache

All-consuming FC 24 mode Ultimate Team is better than most give it credit for – but even so, it's cursed the sports genre for an eternity. WWE 2K24 is the best wrestling game in over a decade. It contains fan-service elements that go above and beyond what you'd expect from an annual title. It's fun, authentic, and replayable. And it all gets hamstrung by its own FUT-style fantasy mode.

Familiar players will be well aware of MyFaction, where you build a four-strong roster to barrel through matches for rewards and upgrades. Like in FUT, you can expedite your progress using paid-for currency. Unlike in FUT, your enjoyment of the entire game is affected by this one mode. At launch, all five 'News' start-up screens push you directly there. You're repeatedly funnelled in the same direction via rewards from other modes. Once in MyFaction, you can unlock Persona cards with alternate attires to use across the entire game – but until you've done so, those wrestlers will be scrubbed out on menu screens. It's all ugly and sullies an an otherwise outstanding game.



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £64.99
ETA Out now
PUB 2K
DEV Visual Concepts
PLAYERS 1-4
LENGTH 50-100 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable difficulty; numerous gameplay sliders and input options

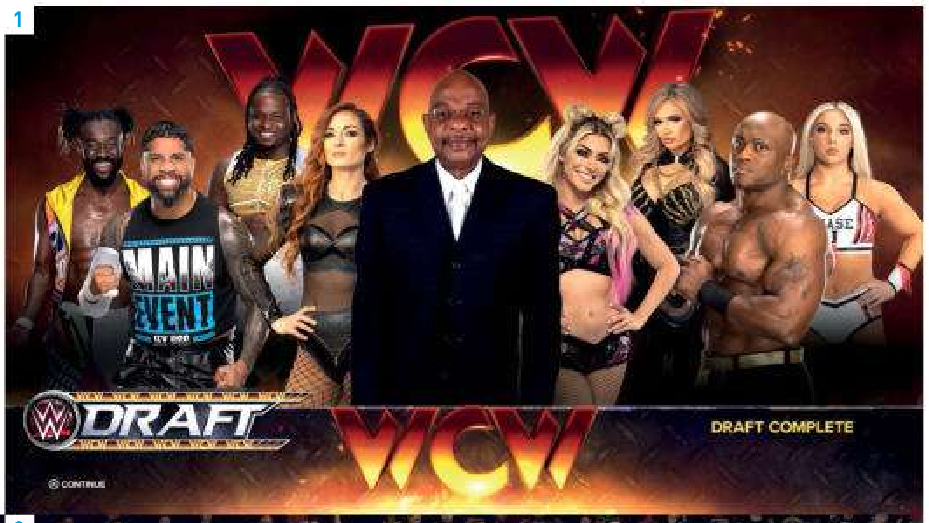
CALL THE AMBULANCE

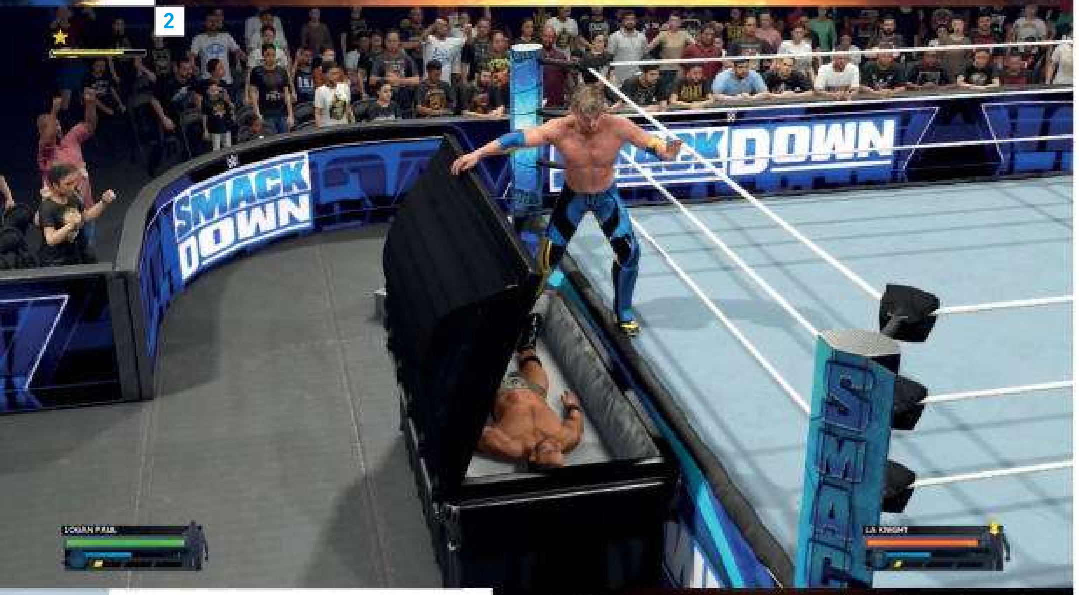
Yes, outstanding. Really. When you're not getting MyFaction drummed into your skull, WWE 2K24 is quite wonderful. Standard matches are enhanced by a world of new animations, Paybacks, and other intricate details: we get three ring announcers and seven real-life referees. Super Finishers, where you use three bars of HUD stock on an OTT monster move, are outrageously fun. All six new match types (ambulance, casket, special guest referee, and a trio of gauntlet options) feel both fresh and replayable.

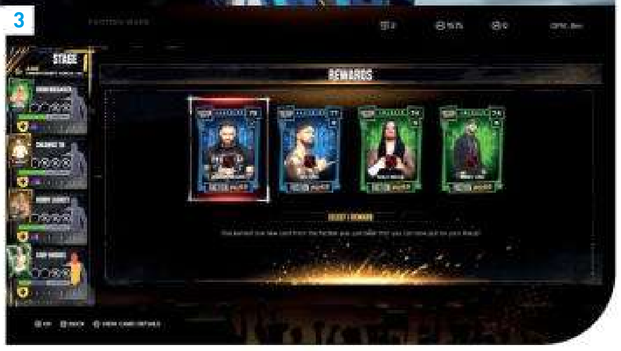
There's so much new stuff that this review could have just been an enthusiastic '101 things to do in WWE 2K24' list. Sling weapons. Climb the announce table. Enjoy the punch-tastic mid-match 'Trading Blows' minigame. Partake in four-player backstage brawls. Unleash updated models for legends such as Trish Stratus, Lita, and Beth Phoenix. Roll through two brilliant MyRise storylines – one male, one female. Even those are full of neat Easter eggs, like the returns of fictional favourites Cole Quinn and Odyssey Rift.

We're used to MyRise delivering a few hours of wrestling goodness, but MyGM goes one better. In its third instalment this management mode finally hits all the right spots. You pick a brand and compete against three other bosses – CPU or human – across a series of 25-week seasons. Matches can be simmed, spectated, or played yourself. The quest is to be the top show, and it really does test your mettle as you weigh up which wrestlers to draft, which feuds are drawing crowds, and which

> There's so much new stuff, this could have been a '101 things to do in WWE 2K24' list.







1 MyGM options are plentiful – such as recreating WCW, with Teddy Long as boss.
2 Casket matches are a highlight, but getting that lid closed is a b*tch.
3 MyFaction has some neat cards, but overall the mode feels ick.

cards to play against your opponent – such as banning their champ from wrestling for a week. It's hugely engaging and the most improved area in the series by far.

THE BIG FOUR-ZERO

The traditional Showcase mode can't quite match up to those other improvements, although it's inoffensive. Ex-NXT grappler Corey Graves presents the usual mix of scene-setting video packages before you revisit highlights from 40 years of super-event WrestleMania. There are too many recent matches, but it's enjoyable to go hands-on with classics such as Steamboat vs Savage and Piper vs Hart. The bonkers bout between John Cena and Bray Wyatt also makes it in, and is pleasingly riotous. Even with the new match types, theres nothing else like it in 2K24.

Indeed, the use of Wyatt demonstrates just how committed Visual Concepts is to fan service. The former world champ passed away last August aged 36, and in tribute to him we get five different versions to utilise – including his nefarious Fiend gimmick. Given things like this, the ginormous roster (240-plus, with 25 grapplers to come) and other smart additions, it's evident 2K seeks to give wrestling community diehards what they want. The trouble is, they largely don't want MyFaction. But MyFaction is where the money is. And so the curse of Ultimate Team blocks WWE 2K24 from achieving true greatness.

Four years on from the abysmal WWE 2K20, this overhauled series is among the sporting elite – but hasn't resolved frustrations with its most controversial mode. **Ben Wilson**

8
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: WWE 2K24

42% Trying out new characters: Chelsea Green! Bronson Reed! Ken Shamrock!

21% Playing as a special guest referee, and trolling with slow counts.

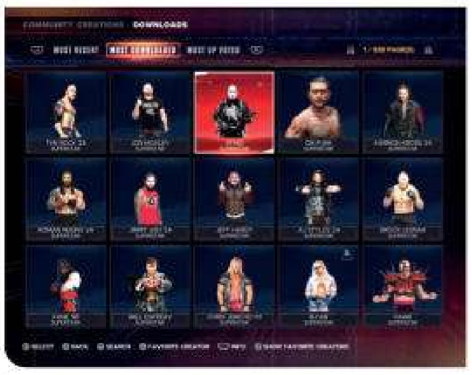
8% Signing random jobbers in MyGM. Let's do this, Chuck McWagon.

10% Loving the back-and-forth authenticity of matches.

14% Changing up shows just to hear the three ring announcers.

5% Whooping at Easter eggs, such as Sheamus' 'lobster head' entrance theme.

HOW TO... GET MORE CHARACTERS



Along with the on-disc roster, you can add up to 100 fan-made wrestlers to your game. Select Online, then Community Creations, then Downloads. You can now search for any wrestler in history. Cool! Early highlights include Sting, Jeff Hardy, and tag giants Legion Of Doom.

STATPACK

56 The number of playable women wrestlers in WWE 2K24 – more than have featured in any other entry in series history.

2K The year in which the series launched, on PS1. Back then it was known as WWF Smackdown – or Exciting Pro Wrestling in Japan.

97 Rating for Roman Reigns – he's the highest-rated player in the game, ahead of The Rock, Steve Austin, and Undertaker on 96.

LOVING/HATING

MONEY IN THE BANK

FAB FACES
The roster size really is staggering, from oldies like Ricky Steamboat to newcomers such as Thea Hail and Fallon Henley.

HEEL TURN
There's no entertaining commentary in Showcase mode, only a pounding soundtrack of mind-numbing dirge. Oof.

TROPHY CABINET

CASH-IN RINGER

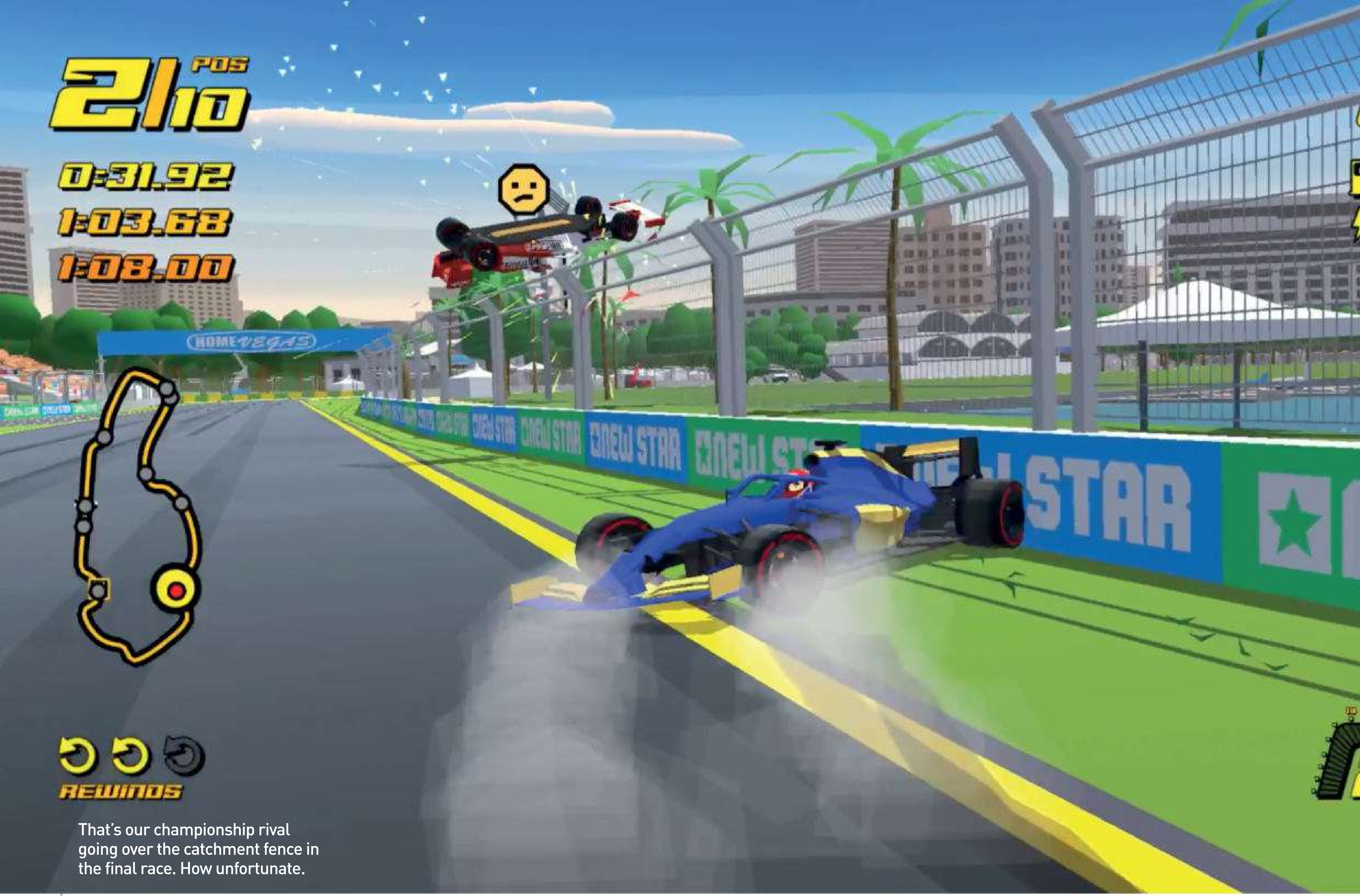
BRONZE
Win a championship through a Money In The Bank cash-in, and bank a bronze too.

GOLD MEDAL SPRINTER

SILVER
Survive a 30-person turmoil gauntlet on Legend difficulty for this one.

UNDENIABLE

GOLD
Complete the men's (Undisputed) and women's (Undeniable) MyRise stories.



That's our championship rival going over the catchment fence in the final race. How unfortunate.

New Star GP

Arcade racing that's way deeper than it first appears

The racing genre has felt like it's lost its way over the past decade, and it's taken a retro-styled indie racer to show the rest of the pack how it's done. It turns out you don't need an official licence, photorealistic graphics, or even online multiplayer to make a great racing game. Everything that's made Formula One great since 1980 has been crammed into short, six-lap races in New Star GP, and the result is wonderful.

Don't let its cheerily colourful looks fool you; this is one of the deepest and most well-rounded racing games ever made. Its very many systems are interwoven in a fashion not dissimilar to Codemasters' official F1 games, in that every single element works in complete harmony with the others to immerse you in its world. But New Star GP also includes heaps of personality and edge in a way the official game never could.

For starters, the AI drivers have different base levels of aggression, but all will react badly to you crashing into them, just as a real driver would. Loads of games claim to have a 'nemesis' system, but the word here has clear gameplay implications. They'll swerve towards you as you pass, weave furiously to keep you behind, or drive you towards the pit wall as you pass. With a click of L3 you can see the name, face, and emotion level of any driver on the screen. Desperate rivals even make reckless passing lunges. It makes for great racing and palpable emotional investment.

PS4
NEW STAR GP

INFO

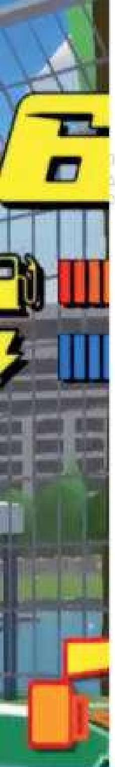
FORMAT PS4
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Five Aces Publishing
DEV New Star Games
PLAYERS 1-4
LENGTH 16 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Seven languages; optional digital steering

DEMON TWEAKS

As for the other kind of investment you'd expect in a game like this, naturally developing your car costs money. However, you could also spend that money on hiring new staff, or donating your winnings to a home for retired kittens (think about it), which makes the other drivers warm to you. Completing event objectives unlocks perks and using these wisely soon becomes a major part of the game. By the final race you may well be deliberately under-fuelling the car to ensure you'll take an early lead, knowing that not only do you have a perk that gives you a few bars of fuel in reserve, but also that you'll get a bonus bar of fuel because you took the chief engineer to the cinema last night and he likes you.

It's all very simple to follow, family friendly, and easy to pick up and play. Pro Difficulty mode was developed just to appease racing game veterans who found the standard game too easy, providing even the most hardcore racing fan with an enjoyable and challenging career. This lasts some 16 hours as you rise through the decades from the '80s to the present day, though there'll still be plenty to finish up after that. You might have to repeat a season to get enough upgrades to win the title, but you only

> Everything that's made F1 great since 1980 has been crammed into six-lap races.



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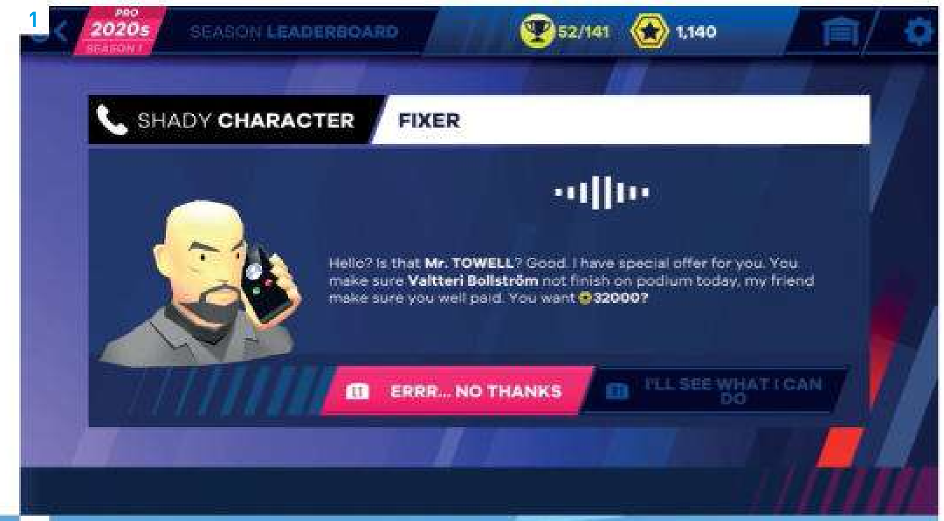
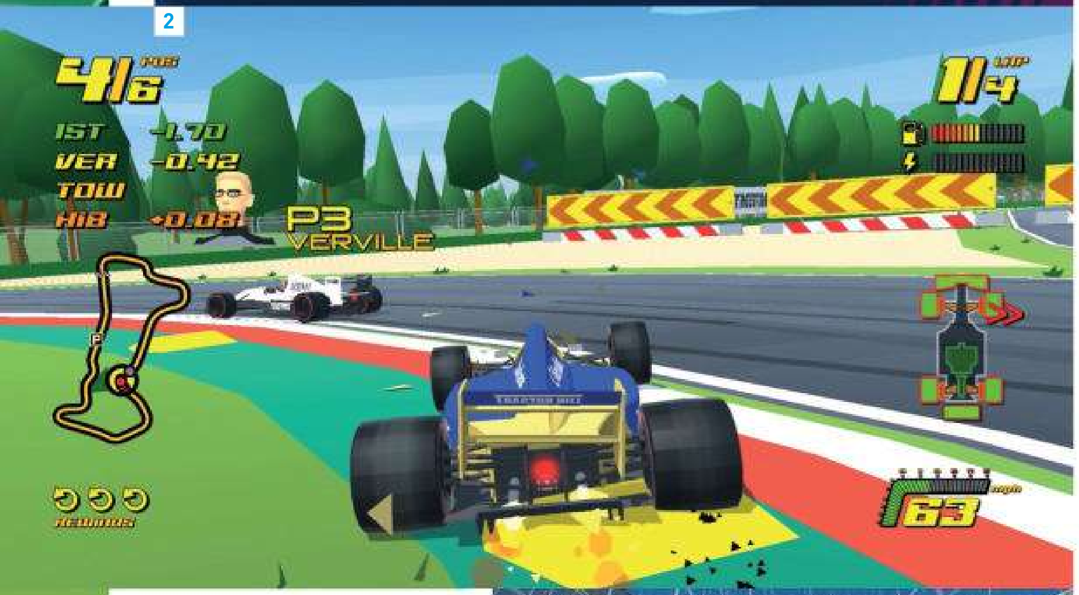


SHADY CHARACTER FIXER

Hello? Is that **Mr. TOWELL**? Good. I have special offer for you. You make sure **Valtteri Bollström** not finish on podium today, my friend make sure you well paid. You want **32000?**

2



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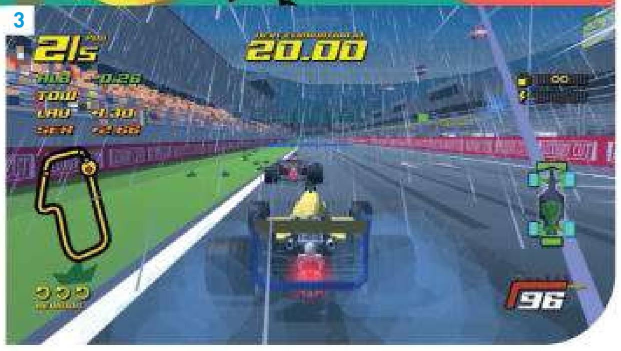


1 Shady Character here offers you daft sums for making sure a certain driver finishes poorly. **2** You can cut any corner, penalty-free, but doing so will wreck your car. So… **3** You can cool wet tyres by driving through puddles.

have to replay Grands Prix so it doesn't take ages to try again.

PURPLE SECTOR

From the mechanical damage system and dynamic weather to the sound design and even the tracks, which are based loosely on real locations and feature two layouts each, there's simply too much to praise here. The few bad points, however, are easy to list: there's no online mode, though split-screen multiplayer is superb. The clean visuals are deliberately retro-styled, but it still looks a bit '2010s iOS game', which won't appeal to everyone. Manual gears aren't an option, and crash damage takes a few knocks to show, simply because realistic collision damage would put everyone out on lap one. The flat-shaded visuals appear to be only running at 1080p or thereabouts, which arguably adds to the retro aesthetic though 'jaggies' are rare today. It is, at least, always super-smooth. Finally, it's not the best-handling racer ever made, but it's certainly more than good enough.

That's all. Every other component feels beautifully balanced and completely convincing. Even the ubiquitous rewind system feels like an integral part of the game, and becomes invaluable when GPs can't be restarted.

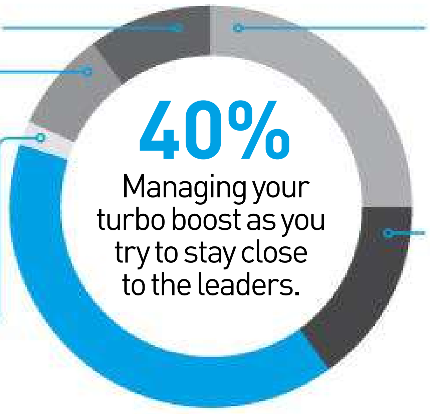
It's a fantastic game at a bargain price. If you have any interest in racing games, and especially if you feel the genre's lacked something in recent years, you need to get on this.

If you watch old F1 races on YouTube, this is the game for you. But everyone should be able to enjoy this charming, accessible, deep, and riveting racer. **Justin Towell**

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: NEW STAR GP



40% Managing your turbo boost as you try to stay close to the leaders.

10% Browsing the available upgrades. Acceleration's up first, no question.

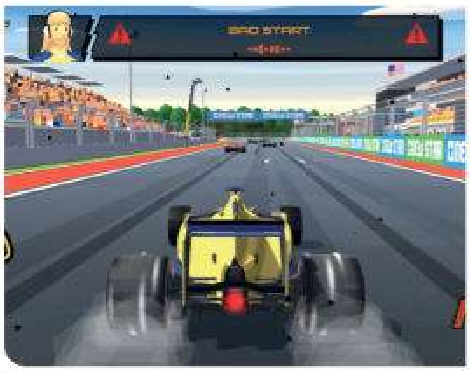
8% Taking part in a checkpoint race, passing gates arcade-style.

2% Trash talking your championship rival, causing him to descend into rage.

25% Panicking at your brakes, engine, gearbox, and tyre condition; repairs cost time.

15% Manipulating your team's mood to get the best perks. Gotta have slipstream.

HOW TO… GET A GOOD START



If you imagine the red lights coming on in sequence as a drum beat, hold the accelerator *just after* the next beat would be after they're all lit. The closer you are to this inaudible beat, the better your start will be – but note that it's not worth going too early and doing a burnout like this.

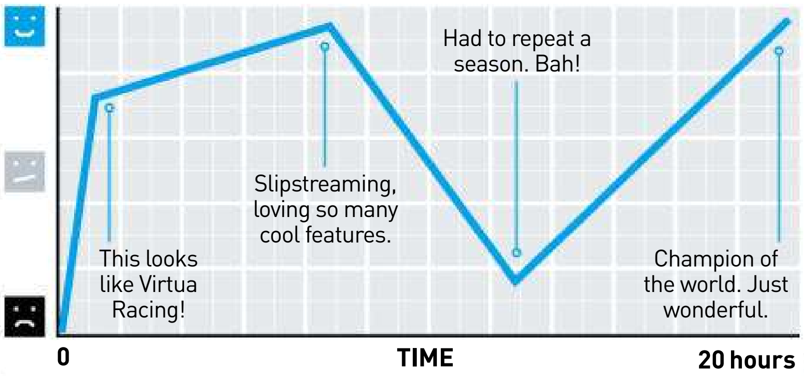
STATPACK

17 Tracks, which might not sound like masses, though each has an alternative layout variant and all can be raced backwards.

99 The most laps you can set in a custom GP. You'll have to pit 40 times in that time, mind – just how often do you want to see your mechanics?

45 AI drivers to compete with, each with a vaguely familiar (though not actually licence-requiring) name. Ayrton Serafino, anyone?

COMPEL-O-GRAPH



TROPHY CABINET

THE BATTLER

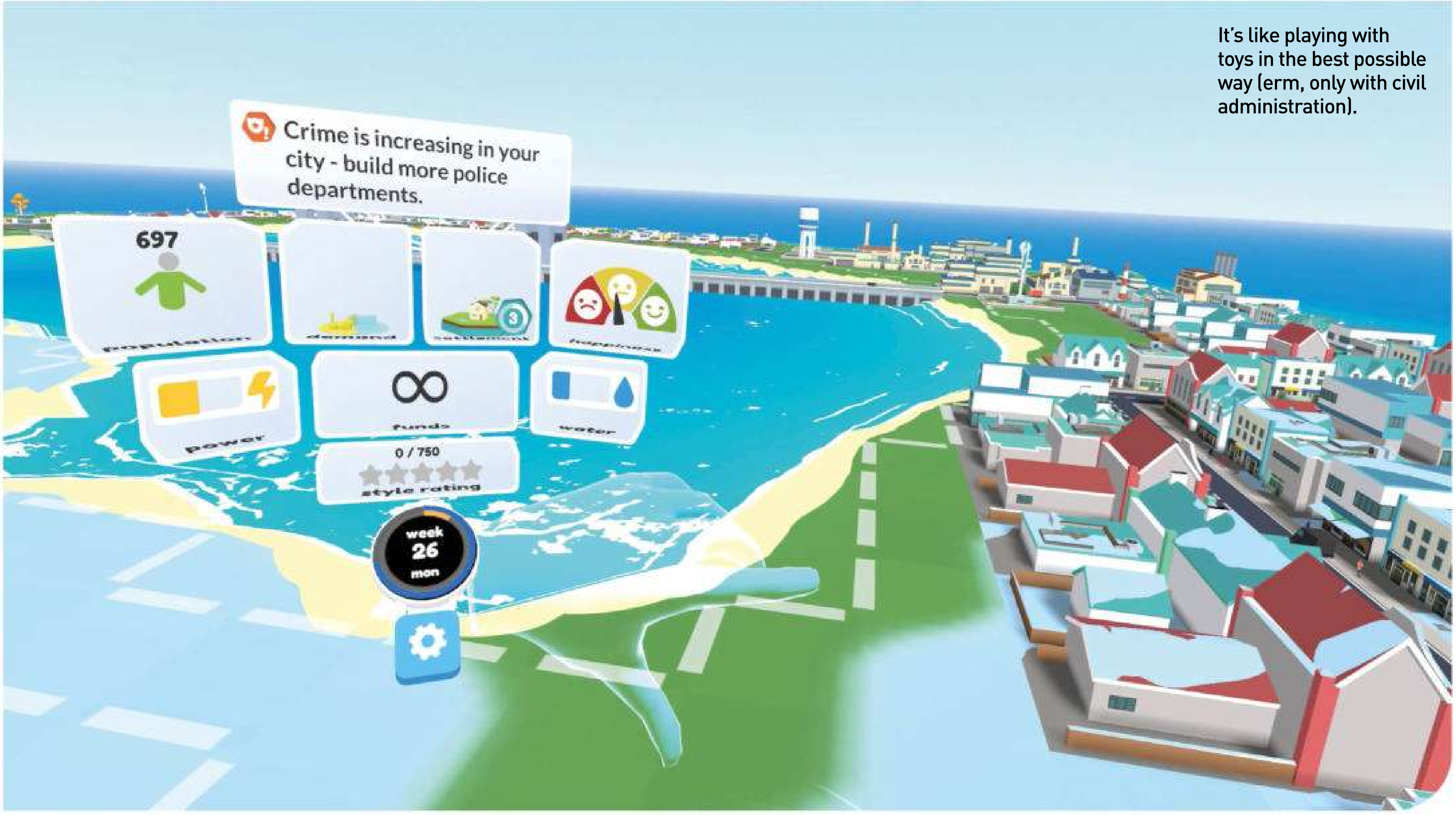
BRONZE
Win a GP in career mode with a broken component. Work for that victory!

THE GOLD RACER

SILVER
Complete enough silver multiplayer championships to unlock the gold ones.

THE CHAMPION

GOLD
Win the 2020s season in career mode, and take this podium-topping trophy.

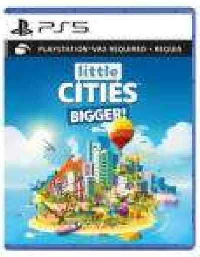


Crime is increasing in your city - build more police departments.

It's like playing with toys in the best possible way (erm, only with civil administration).

Little Cities: Bigger!

Are you city comfortably? Then we'll tell a storey



INFO

FORMAT	PSVR2
PRICE	£19.99
ETA	Out now
PUB	NDreams
DEV	Purple Yonder
PLAYERS	1
LENGTH	6 hrs (campaign)
ACCESSIBILITY	Comfort cage on/off; smooth/snap rotation; adjustable rotation speed; left/right handedness

Generally, we have mixed feelings about city builders. Godlike power to create and care for a virtual world of our own? Yes please! Budget management and running around to perform menial tasks for people you don't know? Ew, no thanks, sounds too much like being an adult. Then there are all the complications that follow the genre around like a whining puppy. How remarkable, then, that this example is relentlessly joyful.

As it's a VR game, the ability to zoom in and out to extremes is more impactful than in a 2D experience, and the presentation here means that getting as close to things as possible is sure to raise a smile. Our favourite aspect may be the simple fact that sometimes a citizen will briefly stop what they're doing to look up at you and wave. This implies that everybody is fully aware of our existence and *power*. Do they love us or fear us? Either is fine, so long as it comes with respect.

The joggers, the cute little cars, the yeti you can spot coming out of a snowy cave… there are so many little bits of icing on the cake. The cake itself is tasty, with an incredibly user friendly UI and a campaign where the introduction of new buildings and gameplay elements is wonderfully judged.

CITY ATTITUDE

The art design and the game design agree on something: this should be treated like a big toy set. While most standard city builder rules apply – citizen happiness must be maintained, electricity and water demand increases with population, certain structures must be built in particular places, and so on – it never loses the all-important sense of play.

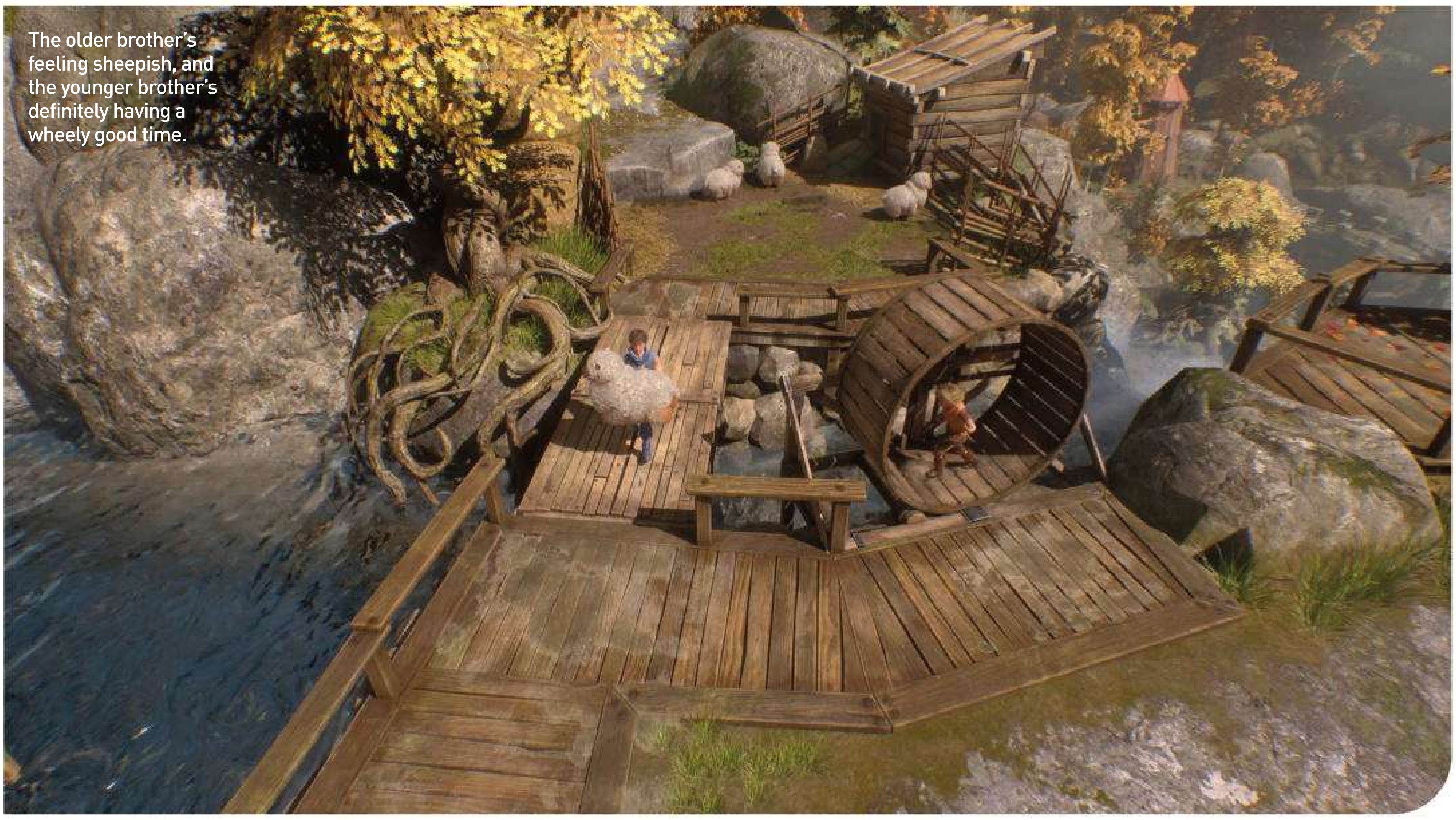
You have a magical watch that makes it easy to keep track of what's needed, and you're teased with bonuses for discovering which buildings complement one another best, the example you're given being playgrounds and schools. We go for ice cream stands and schools because although this offers no style bonuses, you gotta make money right?

As enjoyable and easy to navigate as the structured experience is, it's the sandbox mode where the game shines brightest. With the option to switch on infinite money for true freedom, the sense of being a kid with a playset is enhanced when restrictions are lifted. You still need to consider things such as cell tower and groundwater coverage, sure, but before you get that far you can create the actual land. There's an option to generate a random island, but shaping and decorating your own is a pleasure in itself. You can't pick up people or shake buildings (boo!) – and it kind of feels like you should be able to – but we're very happy with what we have, thank you.

> The presentation here means getting as close as possible is sure to raise a smile.

An accessible city builder that looks as good as it feels, with fantastically friendly design. If only it also gave you the ability to build on rock and roll. **Luke Kemp**

8
PLAY



The older brother's feeling sheepish, and the younger brother's definitely having a wheely good time.

Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons Remake

The remake proves this burning's still a fraternal flame

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB 505 Games
DEV Avantgarden Games
PLAYERS 1-2
LENGTH 3-4 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Item highlight, vibration, and character silhouettes on/off; colourblind options; adjustable master music, sound effect, and UI volume

Despite the fact that the original came out over a decade ago, there's still nothing else like this on the market. Even so, at first glance it may seem that you're looking at an entirely unnecessary remake; the upgraded PS4 version is still available on PSN, and it's as enjoyable as ever. The main reason to grab the remake is, oddly, one that the developer seems reluctant to have included.

Set in a land of myth and mystery, the story – told entirely visually, owing to the use of a fantasy language – is one of a pair of brothers embarking on a quest for a cure for their sick father. It's by turns clever, funny, and sad, but the activity is, as it should be, the real star of this fantastical show.

A solo player is in control of both brothers at all times, with each sibling assigned one half of the DualSense. There's just one button for interaction (L2 or R2), and so this isn't nearly as awkward as anybody who hasn't yet played the game might suspect. In fact, it proves to be a surprisingly intuitive way to control the brothers, and it's a system exploited for some very clever (albeit rarely challenging) puzzles and traversal.

SONS SHINE

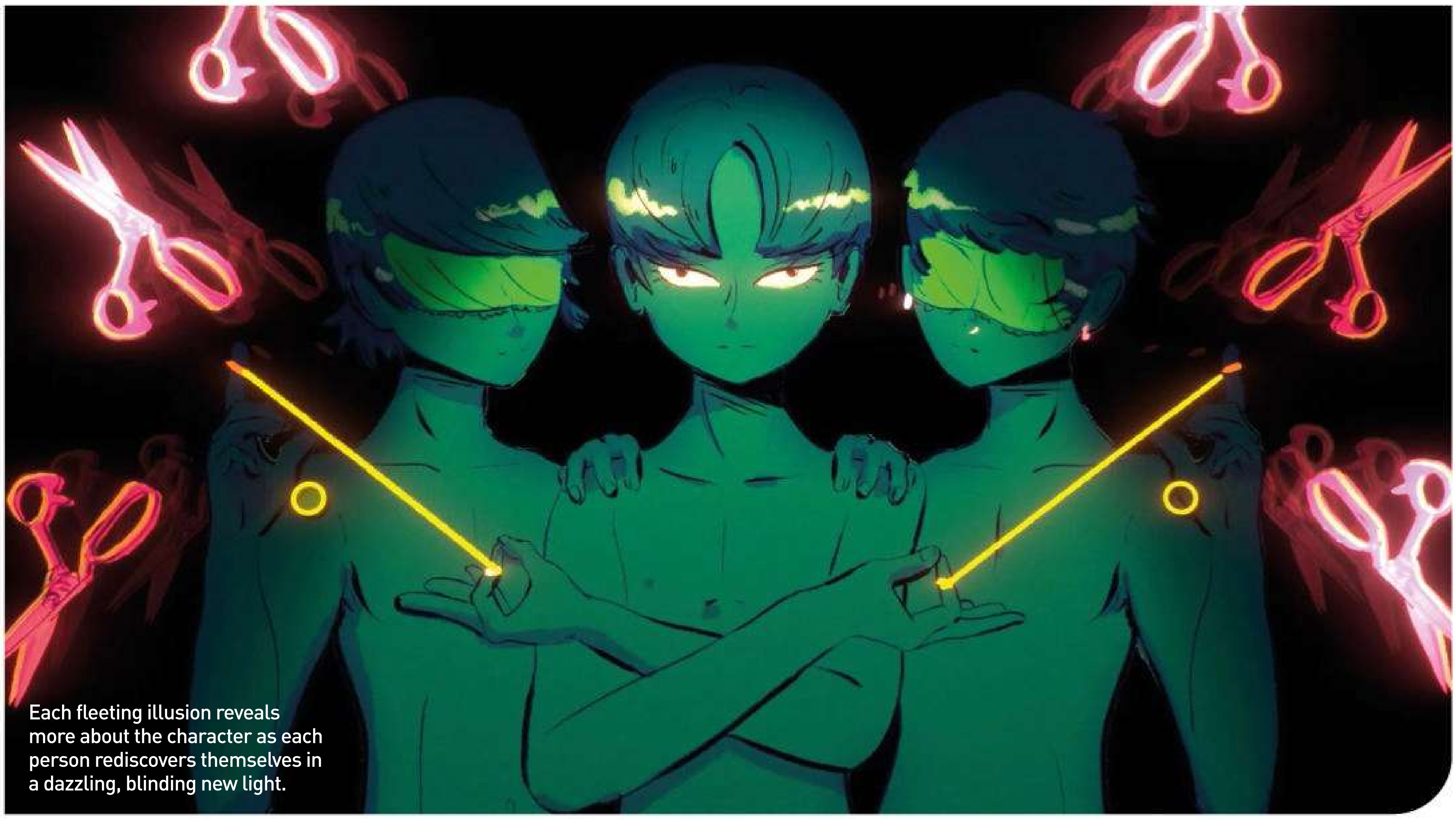
As well as being mechanically impressive, it's a triumph of storytelling, all the more impressive for the complete lack of (intelligible) dialogue. The overarching tale is very simple, but it's the *telling* that is truly impressive. Partly, this is down to the subtle way you're encouraged to flesh out the details without even realising you're being pushed to do so. The interact button, as well as being used for things such as pulling levers and carrying objects, can trigger optional skits with objects, animals, and NPCs. This is the primary way that each brother's personality comes out. The younger brother is energetic, playful, and just a little naughty; the older brother is stronger, more serious, and (usually) less likely to become distracted.

For this remake the game's been given a graphical overhaul, and a number of small tweaks and additions have been made. One obvious thing the remake has that the original didn't is a co-op mode (something previously exclusive to the Switch port). It seems to have been included with reluctance, as each time you start a co-op game you have to get past a message that might as well say 'if you insist, but we'd rather you didn't'. Which is strange, as playing Brothers co-operatively is a wonderful experience.

For one very specific (and very spoilery) reason, solo play *is* still the ideal way to play, and that's how it was originally designed. Artistic intent deserves to be observed and respected, but so too does the opportunity to share a laugh and a puzzle with a friend or family member.

As clever and wonderfully bittersweet as it ever was, now with a drop-in and -out co-op option. A great way to discover or rediscover this indie classic. **Luke Kemp**

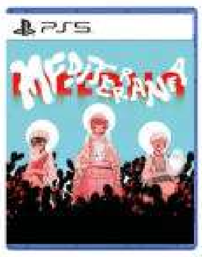
8
PLAY



Each fleeting illusion reveals more about the character as each person rediscovers themselves in a dazzling, blinding new light.

Mediterranea Inferno

Thirsty for revenge



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £7.99
ETA Out now
PUB Santa Ragione
DEV Eyeguys, Lorenzo Redaelli
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 4-6 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Text speed and size options; photosensitivity mode; choice of seven languages (inc English)

After living through the Covid-19 pandemic, we're all due a holiday, and Mediterranea Inferno's trio of protagonists agree. Claudio, Andrea, and Mida decide to reconnect in the blazing heat of southern Italy after years of forced isolation, but this idyllic time of sun hats and swimming pools turns sinister as a creeping, arcane force begins to reveal the boys' darkest thoughts, obsessions, and fears. Bit of a dampener, honestly.

Mediterranea Inferno is a disturbing visual novel by solo dev Lorenzo Redaelli. You'd think watching a group of entitled Milan club kids slowly descend into psychosis wouldn't garner much empathy, but this trinity of characters is magnetic. Their flaws and traumas, wants and needs, are laid out so bare it's almost impossible not to find something twisted inside yourself reflected back at you

SUBMIT SUBMIT SUBMIT

When the three meet up after years of being apart, it seems the boys' drink of choice is a dysfunctional cocktail of bitterness and resentment. The roles and hierarchy of the group have shifted and there's an uncomfortable undercurrent as the former 'queens of Italian nightlife' try to settle back into the group dynamic they had previously. Andrea, once the lustful life of the party, now feels detached and lonely. Frivolous Claudio is alienated from his former lifestyle, seeking a deeper connection with his Catholicism. And finally, there's Mida, the somewhat overlooked and bitter 'third wheel' of the group, who has something to prove as a famous model with newfound wealth and influence. The dynamics have changed and emotions start to bubble under the hot summer heat.

The itinerary of this holiday from hell falls to you. For three days you choose the group's activities, and each night one of the boys – also chosen by you – will experience a 'mirage.' When the sun kisses the horizon each evening, a mythological deity will bestow a special fruit upon a boy of your choice. When eaten, it rewards them with a vision – fantastical, mind palace-style vignettes. As you explore their inner demons and fantasies, it's like a forbidden trip through their arcane inner conscience.

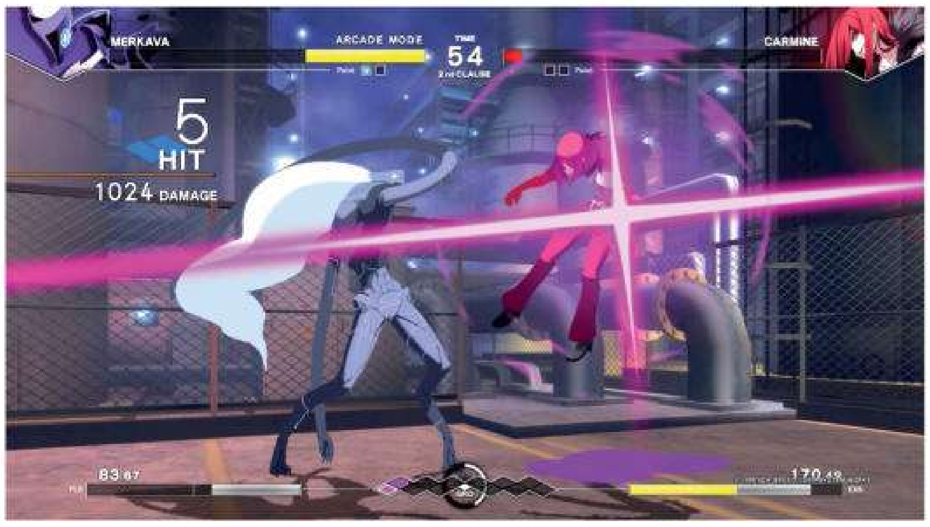
The mirages are a kaleidoscope of images and colour. Collages of indulgence – disco balls, pills, and cocktails – collide with warped social media posts and figures of the Virgin Mary. Naked bodies, once sensual, appear twisted and alien. It's psychedelic, queer nightmare fuel with the added horror that each one's tailored to the individual who indulged in the fruit, their own personal postcard from Hell signed with a taunting kiss. The horrifying realisation is that each of the trio is desperately seeking their authentic needs but is never satisfied with what they find.

> **Collages of indulgence – disco balls, pills, and cocktails – collide with warped social media posts.**

A dazzling and provocative visual novel about post-Covid trauma and the horror of desire and indulgence. This is a winning narrative that's no mere mirage. **Rachel Watts**

9
PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PRICE** £44.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Arc System Works **DEV** French-Bread, Arc System Works **PLAYERS** 1-2



Under Night In-Birth II Sys:Celes

This fighter's a little bit scrappy

No, we don't know what the name means either, but we're glad to see this sequel nonetheless. The first game held its own in the already overcrowded 2D fighting genre, and so we were excited to see what the developer would do with another entry. The answer, to be honest, is… not that much. Not as much as it should have, anyway.

To begin with, there are only three new characters, though returning fighters have been given a new move or two. That won't mean much to you if you missed the first game, which is more than probable as it largely flew under the radar, though it will disappoint existing players. What you need to know is that, as the anime stylings suggest, this is a fast-paced and highly technical beat-'em-up. The devs have done their best to widen the appeal this time around, but with limited success.

For newcomers there's the now-ubiquitous simplified combo control option, and a long list of brief yet very helpful tutorials (which is ironically difficult to navigate if you're looking for something specific). Character designs remain disappointingly generic – a real letdown given that Arc System Works' name is attached – but they sit atop a system that continues to impress.

NIGHT NIGHT

Going into proper detail would take up more paragraphs than we have room for, but the main attraction is the GRD gauge. Sitting at the bottom of the screen, it's an extra layer of contest between the fighters. Your side of the gauge is filled by performing actions such as landing hits and advancing on your opponent, and reduced by actions such as retreating or failing a throw attempt. Every so often, whoever 'wins' the GRD tug-of-war is briefly awarded a 10% damage boost, encouraging fast and aggressive play.

It all works very well but, as the game's appealing to a niche within a niche, the sequel's servers are already full of hardcore fans who will absolutely *demolish* anybody who hasn't mastered the systems. There's also the simple fact that the years between the releases of UNIB1 and 2 have seen some excellent beat-'em-ups hit the shelves, and not enough has been changed or added to enable this to keep up with the competition. It's good, but no longer good *enough*.

By not wandering far from the first game, UNIB2 provides a beat-'em-up experience that's enjoyable, but much weaker in 2024 than it was in 2020. **Luke Kemp**

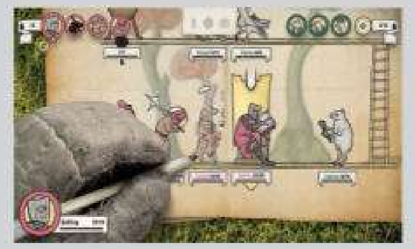
7
PLAY

THREE TO PLAY

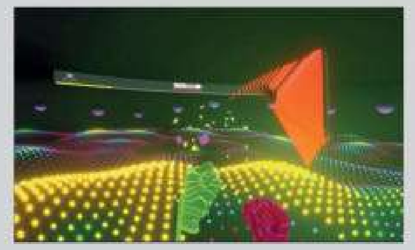
PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut. This month we're putting our hands to work on the page, getting lost in the rhythm, and throwing down in virtual reality.

First in line is **Border Bots VR**. You are one of a lucky few humans with a job – no, this isn't a biting commentary on the absolute state of triple-A videogame development or studio mismanagement. Instead this simulation puzzler is more like Papers, Please with the darkly satirical edges sanded off by comedic farce, seeing you carefully inspecting the tickets and baggage of jet-setting robots, checking their credentials and weeding out dodgy characters. We can't help but feel this title doesn't quite wring every drop out of its 'sole human surrounded by artificial intelligence' premise, but the British voice talent proves a particular treat throughout.



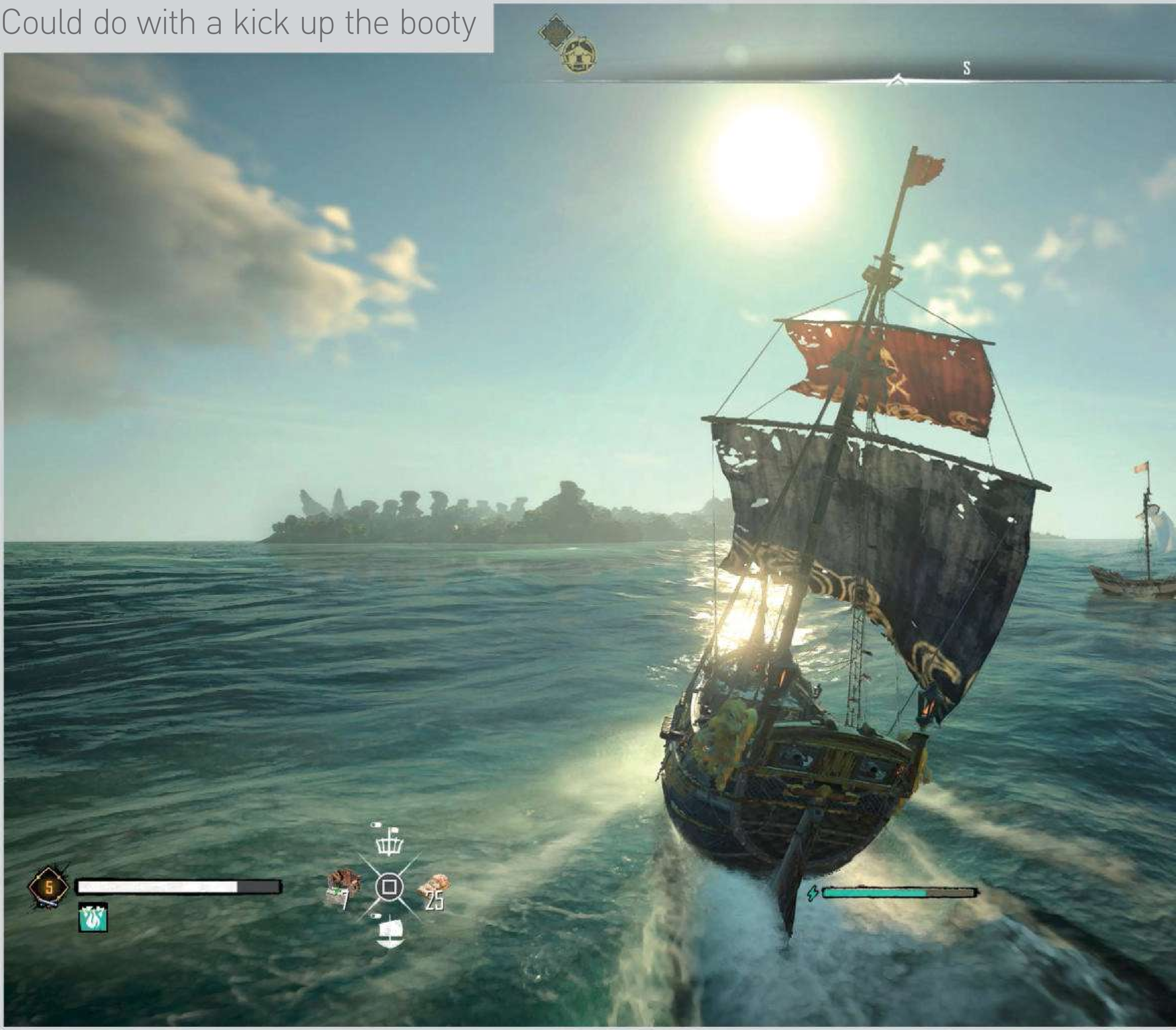
Dipping our quill back into the pot, next up is **Inkulinati**, which caught our eyes the very first time we saw a trailer. For some people, seeing a rude doodle in the margins of an illuminated manuscript is all the encouragement they need to embark on a fruitful academic career as a medievalist. Others – like developer Yaza Games – may instead turn their passion to crafting a turn-based strategy game starring all their favourite bizarre medieval creatures. Here, as a master of the Living Ink, you scribble up a bestiary of wide-eyed creatures to wage war with in strategic action that offers quite a bit of tactical depth. Playful, silly – and, yes, even a little bit rude – the action leaps off the page… though we acknowledge that attacking rivals with incendiary farts probably isn't going to do it for absolutely everyone.



Finally, it's time to throw hands in **Beat The Beats VR**. If you love Beat Saber but want something a little less focussed on finesse and a little more about smashing high scores (often literally), this pulls few punches. Keeping time with the soundtrack by throwing up a forearm to guard, ducking out of the way, or pummelling the musical prompts coming atcha, you're pretty much guaranteed to end up with one soggy PSVR2 headset. Clearly this one's probably best avoided for anyone like Team PLAY who has to share their hardware… You'd better purchase some wipes along with this one.

Skull And Bones

Could do with a kick up the booty



INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £69.99
ETA Out now
PUB Ubisoft
DEV Ubisoft
OFFLINE REVIEW N/A
PLAYERS 1-3 (internet connection required) with 20 player servers
CROSSPLAY Xbox Series X/S, PC, Amazon Luna

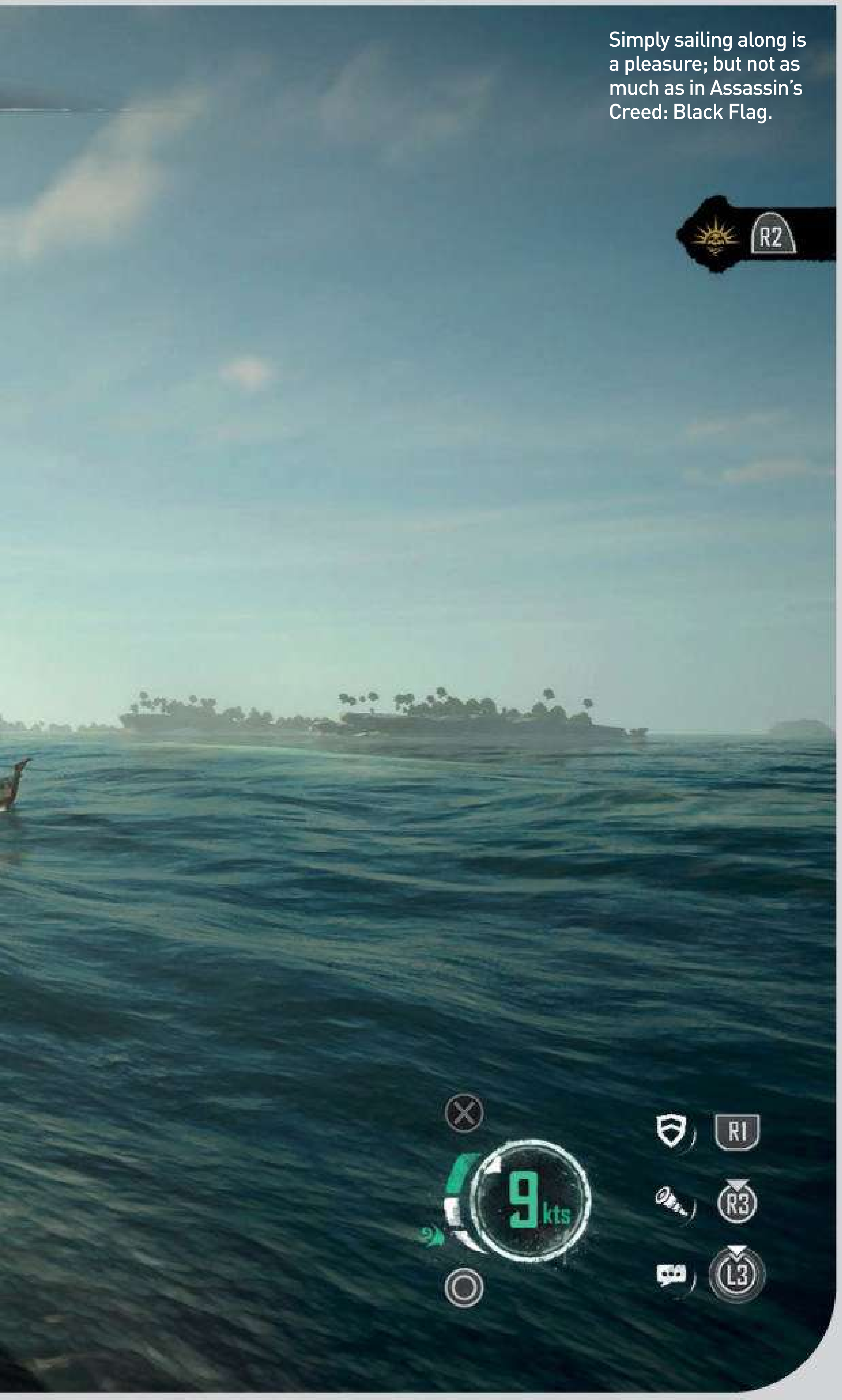
Ahoy there, me hearties! Aye, the ship's finally left port, and while she's seaworthy, there are weevils in the biscuits. Make no mistake, there's plenty of fun to be plundered. Sailing the seven seas (well, one big one, anyway) offers plenty of opportunities to be enjoyably naughty. Still, we can't escape the feeling that there should be something, well… ***more.***

You can take your customisable pirate onto dry land, but there's not much to do once you're there apart from take on missions and trade. There are no land-based fights; no meaningful interactions with NPCs; nothing particularly interesting, to be honest, to be done on foot. All the action takes place on your ship.

> That little ship weaker than you has something you need, and some silver? Get them!

You can craft different types of ships, plus a wide variety of armour and weapons to equip them with. You can give these ships a more personal touch, too, with unlockable cosmetics – and even your own name (the first two additions to our fleet were named Ship Happens and Aaarrrrr2D2). Once you've pimped your nautical ride and you're ready to set off, an adventure awaits.

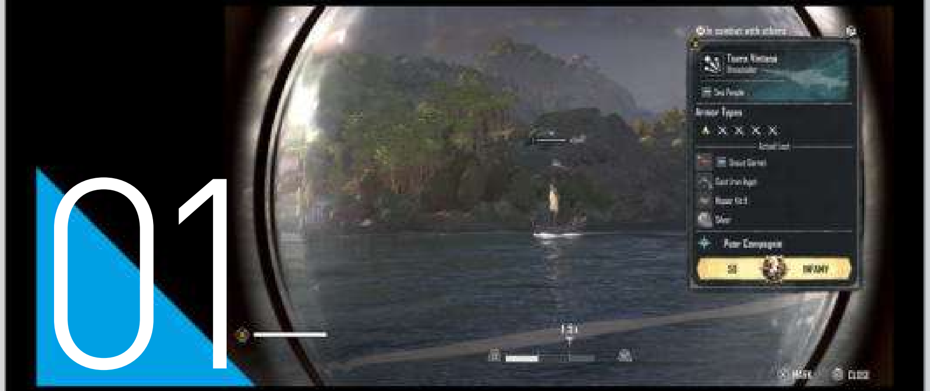
The core experience is undeniably fun. There's a (very weak) story to work through, and an endless supply of NPC missions to take on, but *how* these play out depends on your approach. There's plenty to fill



Simply sailing along is a pleasure; but not as much as in Assassin's Creed: Black Flag.

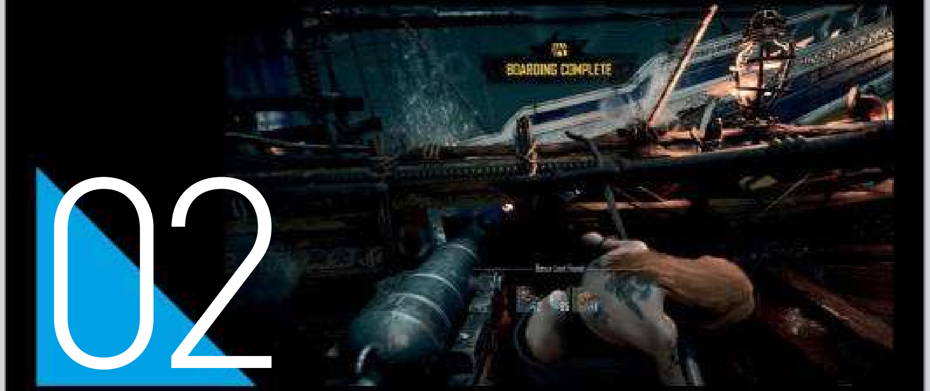
PLUNDERCATS HO!

01



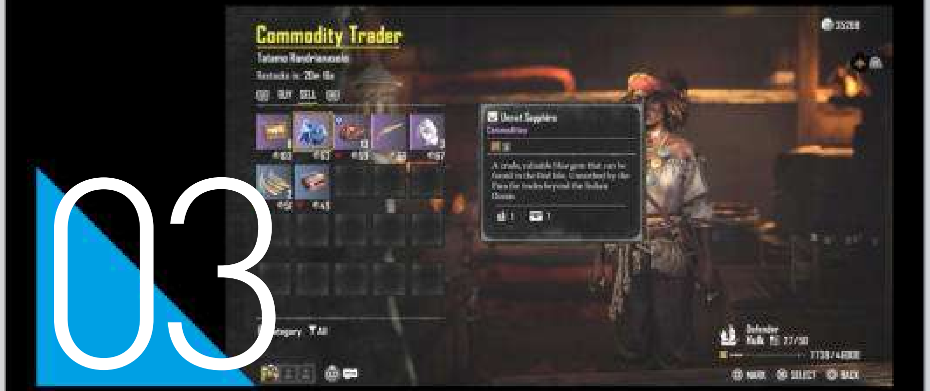
Use your spyglass to see what ships are carrying (your spyglass can be upgraded to see further). Beware of other ships nearby. If allied to your target, they'll immediately become hostile and start attacking you!

02



Want what they have? Take it! Target the bright red weak spots for extra damage, just like a real pirate would. When they're weak, get close for a crew boarding rather than sinking them – you'll get extra loot.

03



Step three: profit. You can sell any commodity to any trader, but values vary across the map. It's best to learn where each item holds the most value (or just experiment) to maximise your haul.

your cargo hold with: commodities to trade; ammo; food to replenish crew stamina for top speed; materials for crafting; and more. You could buy these from ports, or you could loot them.

RUM DEAL

Your spyglass will tell you what ships and settlements you come across are carrying, and how strong they are (ships are levelled according to their gear). That little ship weaker than you has something you need, with the bonus of some silver? Get them! Or if you're feeling less cruel, you can also loot shipwrecks and harvest materials from land that you pass.

The online elements are what tend to drag things down. The way cosmetics requiring premium currency are displayed alongside cosmetics that do not – outside of the dedicated shop – is an ugly, unpleasant approach. It's also pretty clear that players are primarily brought together to encourage them to buy and display premium cosmetics.

Notifications for PvP events invariably appear when you're in the middle of something else, and the slow movement of ships discourages spontaneous detours. The grind becomes more apparent the longer you play, too, with the best items requiring multiple journeys across the map that the flawed fast travel system helps with only slightly. Nautical bullying is always enjoyable, but the more you play, the more you need to make your own fun.

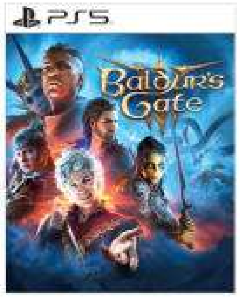
Seabound play is great fun, initially at least, but the longer your voyage lasts, the more Skull & Bones struggles to provide new, interesting things for you to do. **Luke Kemp**

6
PLAY

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01



Baldur's Gate 3

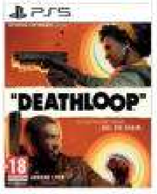
Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03



Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

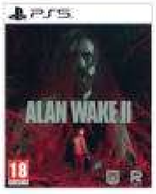
A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06



Alan Wake 2

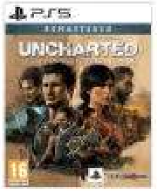
Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

07

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

08



Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

09

Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade

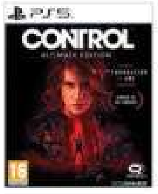
Cloud and the gang get a glow up with better visuals and slicker combat that Limit Breaks this bold reimagining of the Midgar section. Yuffie joins in with an extra story that bridges the gap between this and what's to come, cleverly playing on nostalgia and fan expectation.

10

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11



Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you're able to pick only one of two visual options.

12

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

13

Hitman 3

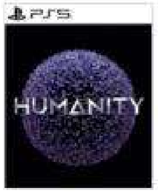
On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

14

Tekken 8

Boasting a roster of returning favourites alongside new faces, and introducing mechanics that make every bout snappier, this fighter hits hard and fast. Looking better than ever only on current-gen hardware, busting out your Wind God Fist has never before felt so satisfying.

15



Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

16

Final Fantasy XVI

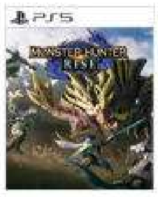
With a mixture of DMC-like action and a mature story peppered with wonderfully deployed regional slang (like 'nowt's) this reinvention feels fresh while also building on past entries' themes. Lacking quirky edges, it's almost too polished – but it's still a treat.

17

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

18



Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big… and save your home!

19

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

20

Solar Ash

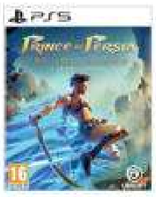
Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

21

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

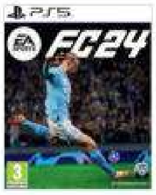
22



Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

In a hop, skip, and a time-warping jump, this once-beloved series has parkoured its way back into our hearts with a new protagonist, Sargon. Movement and combat both possess layers that are a joy to peel back throughout this metroidvania return-to-form.

23



EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

24

Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

A soulslike without stamina? It's just one of the many clever twists in this Ancient Chinese epic where qi governs your actions instead. Go on a tear, and positive energy (for you, not your dead foes) helps you keep the momentum going. Just don't let negative energy build.

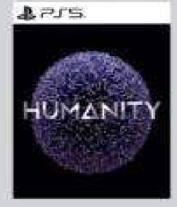
25

Marvel's Midnight Suns

Mushroom-foraging friendship dates, a book club with Blade, and the Sorcerer Supreme's suspiciously small swimming trunks – this one's got it all. A deep affection for all things Marvel runs through this deck building RPG, and the writing and social mechanics charm.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5



Humanity tasks you with shepherding humanity through a strange, abstract world by giving your mass of people directions, telling them where to jump, or even to pick up weapons. We can't do that for you, but we can instruct you towards similar games to scratch that itch.

PICK #1

Kurushi

Old kid on the block

Want more humans who've become inexplicably trapped in abstract cube-realms? The challenging puzzlers Kurushi and Kurushi Final are both available on PS5, though be warned – if you thought Humanity could get taxing in its later stages then this is where you're going to meet the tax collector himself. In control of a single human (and with no adorable dog in sight) you run around a narrow bridge in a void as walls of cubes come toward you, having to make them vanish in order to avoid being crushed.

PICK #2

Stray

One animal to another

Fell in love with controlling Humanity's supernaturally helpful shiba inu? Then maybe you should try directing a cat next. [*Is that actually possible?* – ed.] Stray's kitty falls into a cut-off underground city and must find its way out by platforming like only a feline can (you also need to avoid getting it covered in muck – unfortunately something our own cats can't seem to manage). There are no humans in sight, but the robots who inhabit the world are no less personality-packed, making exploration terrific fun.

PICK #3

Manifold Garden

Stairway to puzzle heaven

Take Humanity's abstract designs to the next level with this reality-bending first-person puzzler that asks you to unravel Escher-like logic in fully explorable spaces. From shifting gravity to recursive spaces, you'll need to wrangle your way through strange architecture, feeling very clever as you manage to do so. Manifold Garden is more than just a head-scratcher, though; the design here is beautiful as well, and all the more pleasing to lose yourself in thanks to the way you have control over the space.

Every screenshot from Manifold Garden feels like a work of art in itself.

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

PS4
RED DEAD REDEMPTION II
18

Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04

The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05

Dreams

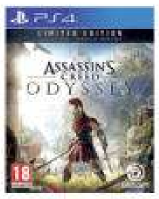
This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07



Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is a epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

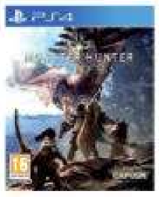
FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13



Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14

Resident Evil 2

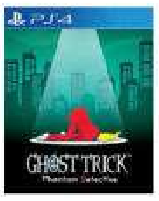
Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16



Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17

PSYCHONAUTS 2

Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18

NieR:Automata

Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20

Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22

DISHONORED 2

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

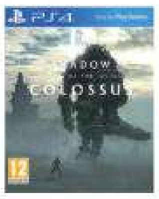
23

ALIEN
ISOLATION

Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary… and then get killed by it.

24



Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25

TEKKEN 7
DEFINITIVE EDITION

Tekken 7: Definitive Edition

The title for best fighter on PS4 is fiercely fought over, but for our prize money King remains the, er, king. Easy to pick up, with plenty of depth, few fighters feel quite as crunchy as this. With all DLC characters now released, from Noctis to Negan, it's time to get sweaty.

TAYLOR MADE DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Reunion

£19.99 approx (PS4, amazon.co.uk)

FFVII Reduced (price)

There's no better time to catch up on Zack Fair's story than now. Getting familiar with this dark-haired himbo's prequel adventure adds a lot to a playthrough of the brand-new Final Fantasy VII Rebirth (see p68 for our in-depth review of that one). Originally designed for PSP, there's a bite-size feel to bashing through the game's many missions. Combat is similarly simple, but it becomes satisfying to master, especially in this prettied-up overhaul (though many missions are missable). Plus, you can level up this PS4 version further – the PS5 upgrade is free.

UNDER £15

Immortals Of Aveum

£15 approx (PS5, CEX)

A magical deal

Trade guns for magical equivalents in this first-person spellslinger from former Dead Space and Call Of Duty devs. We found the blasting lacked impact, and its three-colour system a little pointless (the powerful blue type is often more effective than the others), and didn't think much of the lengthy campaign's fantasy narrative either. And yet there's something compelling about a massive-budget FPS that dares to be a bit different. There's a reason this is already so cheap, but at this price it's hard to resist seeing what all the fuss was about.

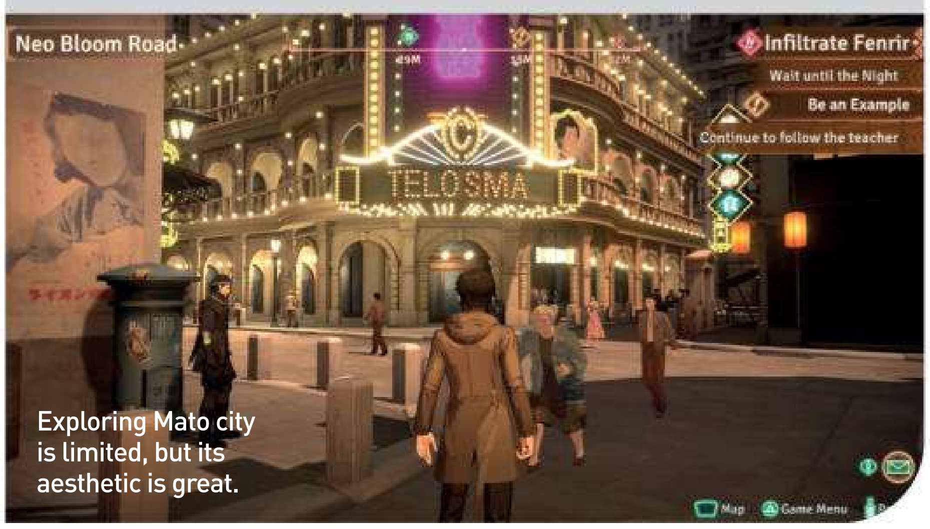
UNDER £10

Mato Anomalies

£5.95 approx (PS5, thegamecollection.net)

High prices: exorcised

This lightweight Persona-like feels a bit budget. But that's exactly what you'd expect in this price range. The story's presentation can move at a 'blink and you'll miss it' pace and combat can feel a bit loose. But look past that and there's plenty to love about Mato, the Shanghai-inspired cyberpunk city, with some gorgeous presentation and a detective hook that's easy to get into. It's not a setting we see in many games, so it offers something fresh here, and while the corridor dungeons are basic they're at least snappy to move through. Worth investigating.

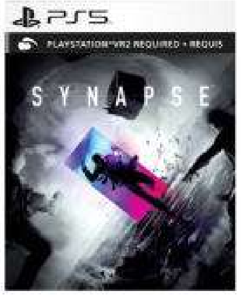


Exploring Mato city is limited, but its aesthetic is great.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

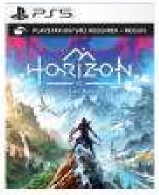
01



Synapse

Telekinesis and guns make a wonderful combo in VR. With one mapped to your left hand and the other to your right, you feel like a conductor of chaos as you blast your way through a rogue colonel's mind to uncover secrets. Eye-tracking is wonderfully used to target your telekinesis, meaning you can slam enemies all over the place as you reload your arsenal. It's got a roguelite structure, so you'll keep coming back.

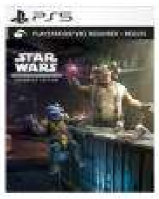
02



Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

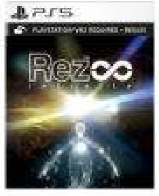
03



Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You.* Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

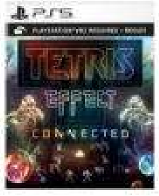
04



Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

05



Tetris Effect: Connected

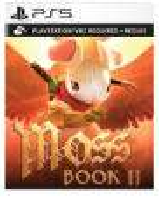
While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

06

No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

07



Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

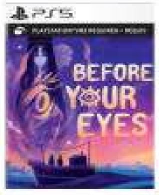
08

GT
GRAN TURISMO 7

Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

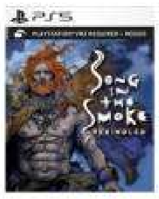
09



Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

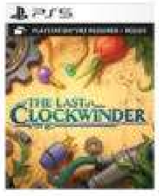
10



Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

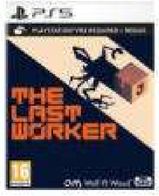
11



The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

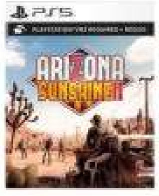
12



The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

13



Arizona Sunshine 2

The familiar survivalist beats of a 'one man against the apocalypse' setup are boosted by making that 'one man and his dog.' Zombie-offing action is already elevated in VR, but adding man's best friend to your arsenal makes this title one of the best in show.

14

JURASSIC WORLD
AFTERMATH
COLLECTION

Jurassic World Aftermath Collection

Clever girls for a clever game. You're looking to salvage research data from the dino park's ruins and get out alive, all while being hunted by 'raptors (like the tense scene from the original movie). Other dinos pop up, but the velociraptors are the focus, for better and worse.

15

WHAT THE BAT?

What The Bat?

With your arms transformed into baseball bats, you must progress through loads of minigames that take you through different periods in your life. A great way to get used to 1:1 hand-tracking, the zany challenges are only let down by a slight lack of variety.

PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02

The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03

Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

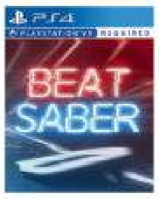
Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05

Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06



Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07

Iron Man VR

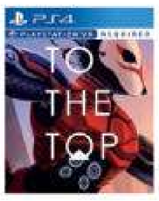
With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08

Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

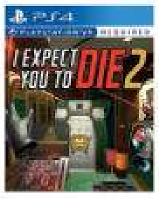
09



To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10



I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

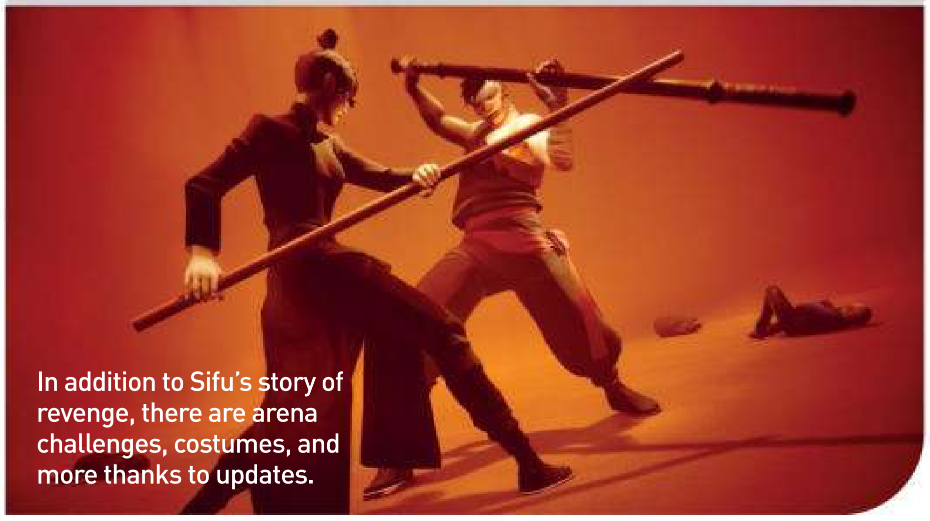
Last month's PS Plus offered gaming treats for you and your mum in time for Mother's Day – though perhaps **Destiny 2: The Witch Queen** on PS5 and PS4 won't top your list of family bonding activities. Also on both consoles was racing game **F1 23** and stealth-'em-up **Hello Neighbor 2**.

That said, maybe your folks are really cool and they'll be into last month's final PS Plus offering on PS5 and PS4, **Sifu**. A brutal tale of revenge, this playable martial arts flick from Paris-based dev Sloclap (best known for Absolver, a multiplayer martial arts game that puts the 'deck' in 'deck builder') just doesn't quit.

This single-player action adventure wears its cinematic inspirations on its sleeve (the continuously shot corridor fight scene from Oldboy is a particularly obvious source). Your fighting style is built around kung fu moves, which you use constantly as you hunt down the villains who slew your family – though there are an awful lot of goons between you and them. The twist here is that your protagonist is very much prepared to die trying.

Surprise! This beat-'em-up is actually a roguelite! In addition to sniffing out shortcuts and secrets hidden around levels, a mysterious talisman resurrects your protagonist after every death – at the cost of years off their life. But with age comes experience, and as such your strikes become deadlier while your health pool shrinks with every resurrection. It's a potent blend of mechanics and narrative theming, especially as you can choose either to slay or to spare every villain who wronged you.

It's also bloody difficult. At launch, there were *no* difficulty options, inspiring a lot of colourful language that'd make our mama proud during our review effort. Three settings have since been added, though even the easiest, 'student,' continues to humble us.



In addition to Sifu's story of revenge, there are arena challenges, costumes, and more thanks to updates.

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 58

PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO | PS PLUS
PLAY
NO.1 FOR PS5
ISSUE 39 £5.99 MAY 2024 gamesradar.com/playmag
XBOX HITS PS5!
HI-FI RUSH and more former exclusives come to PlayStation – could Halo be on the way?
→HUGE EXPANSION
ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE
The studio's most ambitious DLC yet looks stunning
→PS5 EXCLUSIVE
FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH REVIEWED!
Bigger, better, Buster Swordier: our verdict on 2024's must-play
→FIRST VERDICT!
RISE OF THE RONIN
Ninja Gaiden dev's first open world impresses on PS5!
→ RIP-ROARING ROBOS
STELLAR BLADE SHARPENS ITS STEEL
Nier meets Sekiro in this massive android adventure
→ WE'VE PLAYED IT!
GORGEOUS SOCIAL MEDIA MYSTERY
Move over magnifying glasses, Until Then prefers smartphones
FUTURE
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RetroStation

108 Days Gone

Was Bend Studio's post-apocalyptic zombie adventure an overlooked gem?

HIGHLIGHTS

MEMORY CARD: DAYS GONE 108 | DEFENDING: MATT MILLER 109 | CLASSIC GAME: TOMB RAIDER III: ADVENTURES OF LARA CROFT 110 | PLUS POINTS: RESISTANCE: RETRIBUTION 112 | A BRIEF HISTORY OF... STEALTH GAMES 113 | PARTING SHOT: CELESTE 114

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these April moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

10 YEARS

Disappointing 2D spin-off Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate got ported from PS Vita to PS3. It was sadly too repetitive and shallow to have the impact of the awesome 3D Arkham games. Revisit Batman: Arkham Origins instead.

15 YEARS

EA made gamers an offer they couldn't refuse with the release of The Godfather Part 2: The Game. Except, er, everyone did refuse it, with abysmal sales causing EA to scrap plans for a game of the third Godfather film. Considering the quality of said film, that's fine.

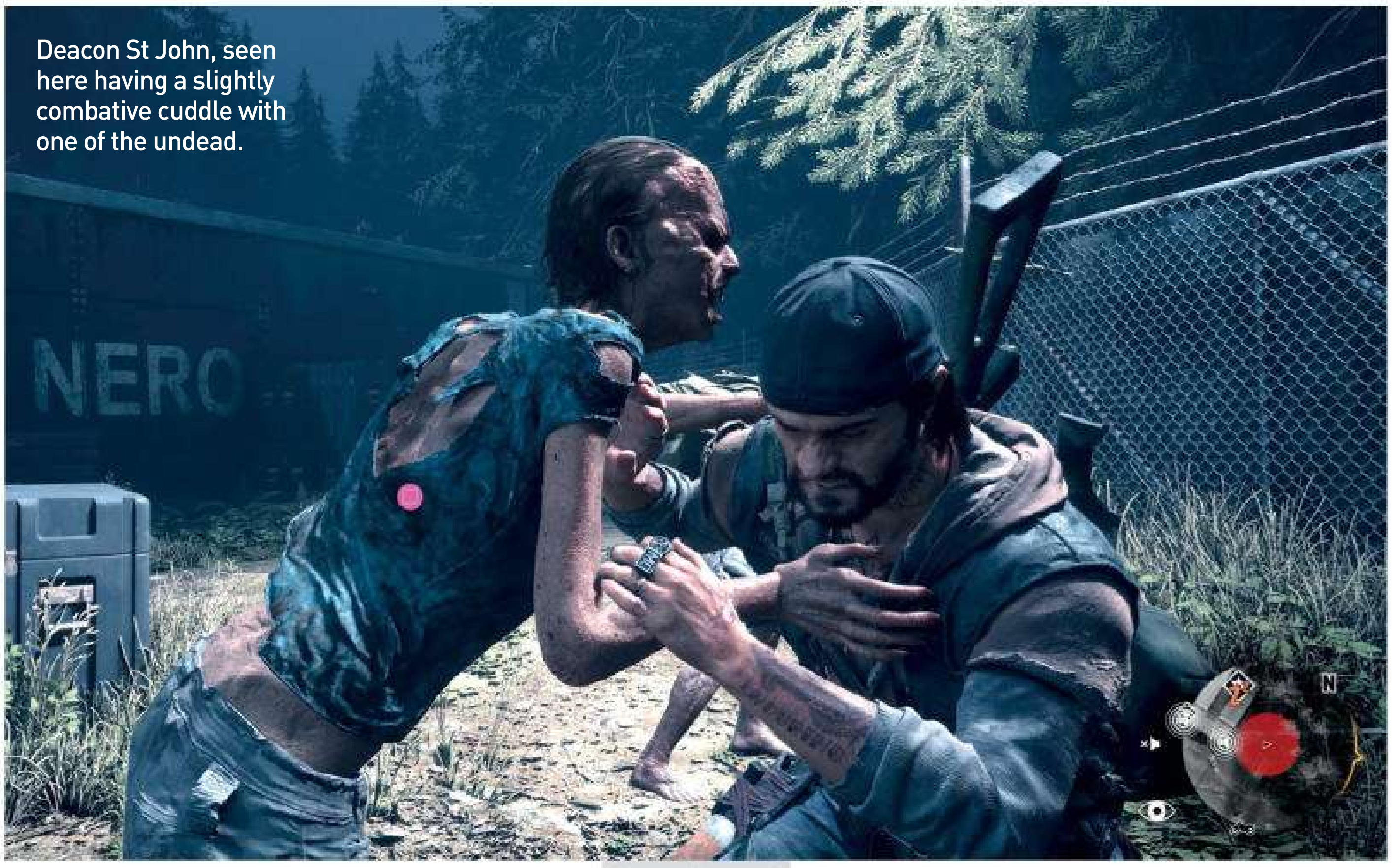
20 YEARS

Ol' cueball returned for a third bout of grisly murders and delightful dressup in Hitman: Contracts. Its sequel, Blood Money, was so acclaimed that this game has all but gone from collective memory. Almost like someone took it out…

MEMORY CARD

Days Gone

1,825 days gone! Or five years old, to put it less confusingly



Deacon St John, seen here having a slightly combative cuddle with one of the undead.

Pity the PlayStation exclusive that's about zombies but doesn't have 'The Last Of Us' in its title. Yes, Days Gone was a huge hit, but is forever stuck in the shadow of its cousin. Shame. We'd love an HBO show with Pedro Pascal as the motorbike.

Bend Studio's game has lots of fans. "One of the best," says reader **Malcolm Betruger**. "This is how you do a proper Zombie game." A view Malcolm holds so passionately he's capitalised 'Zombie'. And he's far from alone. "Absolutely brilliant," raves **Nick Reed**, also. "Will always be one of my faves. Only people that didn't appreciate it was Sony."

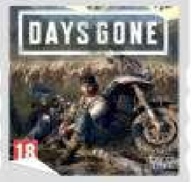
Days Gone cast you as Deacon St John, a tedious dullard. Luckily that charisma-free berk wasn't the *true* star. That would be the motorbike you use to zip around the open world and flee the zombie hordes. "'Love the game so much it made me consider getting a motorbike licence again," says **Jackson Chen**, who doesn't clarify how he lost his *initial* licence. Trying to imitate the chases in this game? Let's hope not.

"I hated bikers until I played this game," says **Goran Vidovic**, who presumably signed up for the Hells Angels after platinuming it. As the game's available on PS Plus, it's worth a replay or second look if you missed it the first time. It has zombie kids, not often seen in zombie games (probably because features like 'Shoot children to survive!' make marketing departments weep).

"Loved fighting the hordes," says **Scott Cunningham** "and remember the relief I felt when I finally beat the saw mill horde." Ah, the hordes. Definitely the most 'next-gen' (for the time) feature, throwing a daft number of zombies on-screen. If they want to chow down on Deacon St John, be our guest. Hope he tastes less bland than his personality.

▷ Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

MEMORY CARD



INFO

PUB Sony
DEV Bend Studio
RELEASED ON PS4
RELEASE 2019
IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS…
Mad Max mashes an open world with vehicular action; Dying Light 2 offers more parkour-based zombie action

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

7,000,000

Million copies sold to date. Mixed reviews and a loooong development stopped a sequel being greenlit.

65

Zombie-killing hours, on average, to platinum it.

01

Animal (John Garvin's childhood pet) inspired the lead's name.

MONGREL
FAREWELL ORIGINAL

DEFENDING

Matt Miller

A coward? Emma Withington says Saints Row's gothy hacker Matt Miller is anything but

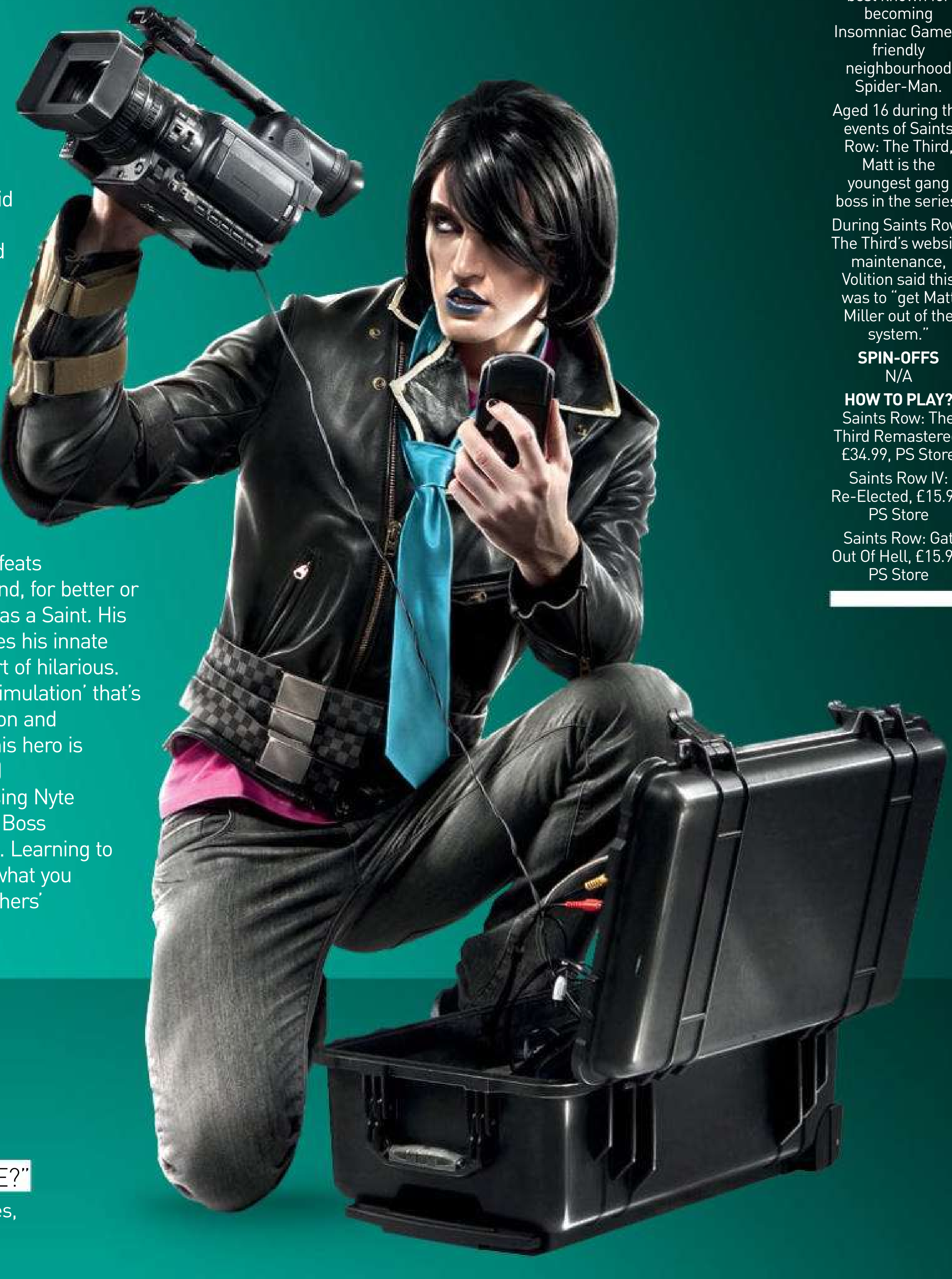
One moment you're a roving toilet with a cannon, blasting through the neo-gothic Decker usernet and bathed in neon. The next you're in the world's most bizarre text adventure, in which you must make the ultimate sacrifice: a unicorn. All to bring down Matt Miller – a genius hacker with a God complex and unbridled obsession with Nyte Blayde.

As the leader of the technologically charged Deckers, Matt brought a fresh energy to Saints Row, elevating it to its more bizarre heights. But why defend the ultimate keyboard warrior?

Matt is an intelligent yet misguided kid with a lot of heart. He's the only gang boss to recoil at the sight of murder and as reality kicks in, so does his conscience. It may seem cowardly to retreat fearfully from Killbane and the Syndicate with a deflated ego, but it takes courage to back away from a 'demanding workplace' and admit your wrongs to become a better version of yourself.

Not many second chances involve working at MI6 and surviving the apocalypse. With some encouragement from the Boss, Matt defeats Killbane in his personal pixelated hell and, for better or worse, his full personality is unleashed as a Saint. His untethered childlike glee as he embraces his innate nerdiness is infectious and nothing short of hilarious. Dragging the Boss through a 'training simulation' that's pure unadulterated Nyte Blayde fanfiction and screeching at the prospect of meeting his hero is endearing. (We've all been there, right?)

Matt reaches breaking point upon losing Nyte Blayde, but instead of belittling him the Boss encourages him to 'never stop' creating. Learning to be confident in yourself and indulge in what you enjoy, unashamedly so, regardless of others' opinions – what's not to love?



> CAN YOU CALL ME NYTE BLAYDE?"
>
> His obsession extends to the bedroom. Yes, I had really bizarre crushes growing up.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Saints Row: The Third

Saints Row IV

STATS
Matt Miller is voiced by Yuri Lowenthal, who is best known for becoming Insomniac Games' friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man.

Aged 16 during the events of Saints Row: The Third, Matt is the youngest gang boss in the series.

During Saints Row: The Third's website maintenance, Volition said this was to "get Matt Miller out of the system."

SPIN-OFFS
N/A

HOW TO PLAY?
Saints Row: The Third Remastered, £34.99, PS Store

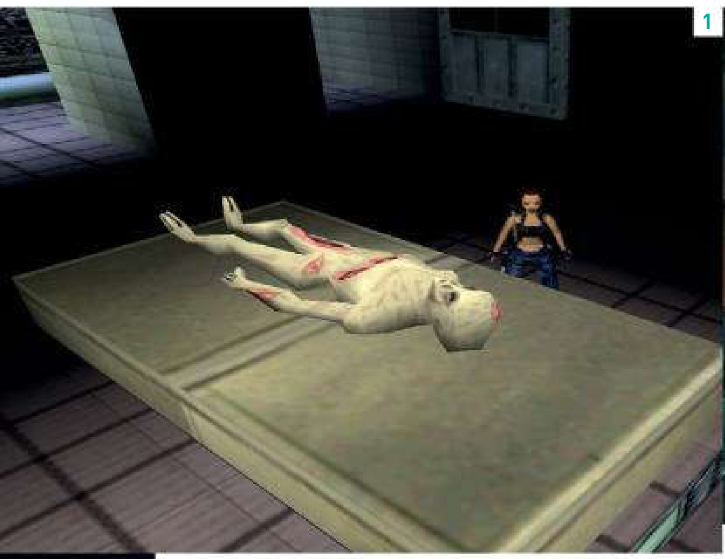
Saints Row IV: Re-Elected, £15.99, PS Store

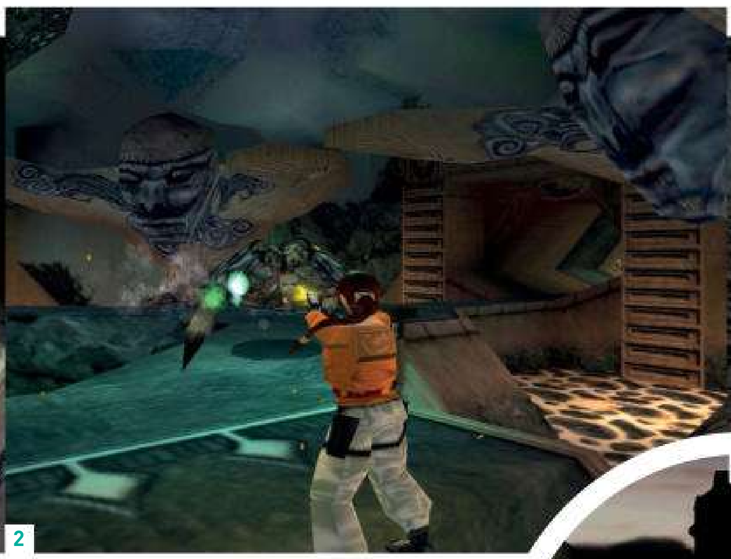
Saints Row: Gat Out Of Hell, £15.99, PS Store

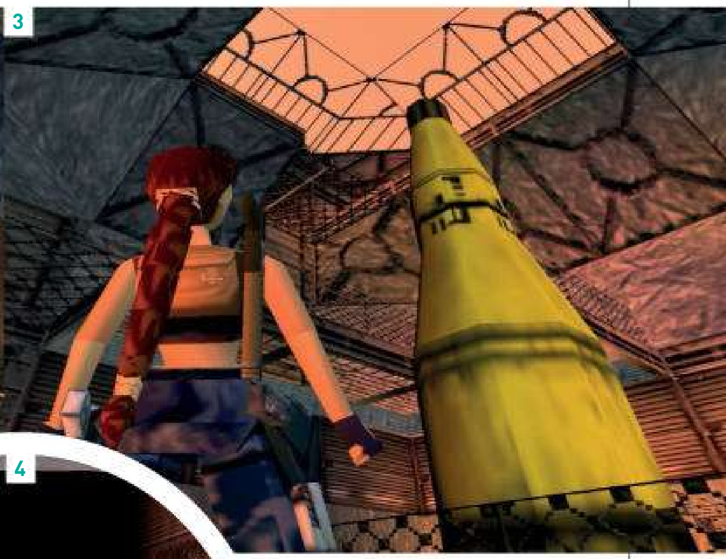
CLASSIC GAME

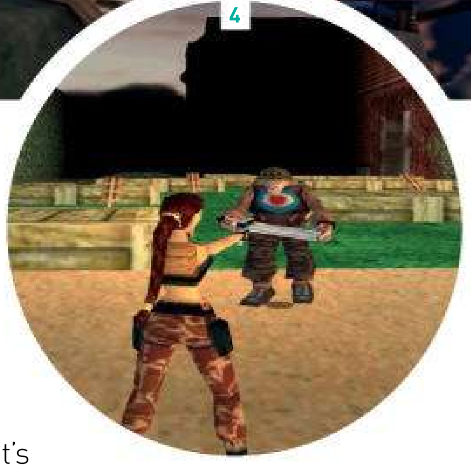
Tomb Raider III: Adventures Of Lara Croft

Crofty's been around the world more times than Lisa Stansfield

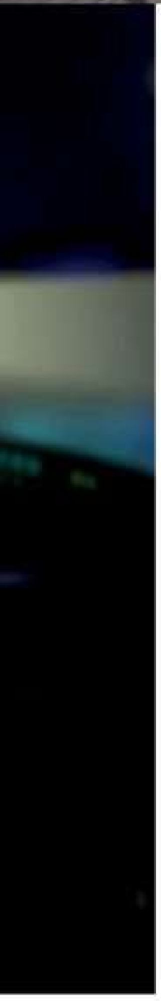








1 Looks like the rumours about Area 51 are true, then. **2** There's no jar and postcard big enough to trap Spider-Willard. **3** Launching a missile to ultimately get to a switch is classic Tomb Raider logic. **4** Out of the freezer and into unfriendly fire. **5** You'll sooner swim the rapids after a fight with this thing.



Having put a stop to a dragon-phasing Mafia honcho and his pals in her previous outing, Lara was ready for action, as November 1998 saw Core Design go for the hat trick with Tomb Raider III: Adventures Of Lara Croft. Originally planned for a longer dev cycle targeting the rumoured PS2, the demand was too high, leading to this iterative followup.

While globetrotting has always been integral to Lara's exploits, the third game in the series saw her luggage on the baggage carousel in a notable number of impressive locales (although it's unclear as to why as you literally slide right into India without explanation). That immediate descent proves that the environments hold a lot more than the typical occupational hazards of spike pits and boulders – this is a game where the dangers keep coming at you.

And you'll learn the new, devious mechanics and features the hard way, right from the memorable introduction that has Lara wading through quicksand, sprinting past famished Bengal tigers, and crawling through the entrances to crafty poisonous snake pits, all in pursuit of (we learn) the Infada Stone.

> "A poor decision will leave you having a worse time than Winston in the freezer… go to Nevada *first*."

After meeting and, er, *disposing of* a researcher who'd succumbed to the stone's power, we meet RX-Tech boss Dr Mark Willard. Initially posing as an innocent, tomato-soup-loving scientist, Willard enlists Lara to locate the remaining three meteorite artefacts.

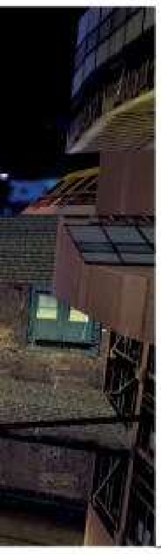
Armed with quite the shopping list, Lara's travel route diverges from those of the previous games, allowing you to tackle the treasure hunt across London, the South Pacific, and Nevada in whichever order you want – but a poor decision will leave you having a worse time than Winston in the freezer. Do yourself a favour and head to Nevada *first*.

That's because it's never a good idea to make a run at Area 51, and after traipsing through desert sands Croft ends up nicked for trespassing. It's common for your arsenal to be taken away in Tomb Raider games, but *when* it happens can make all the difference – you don't want to be diving into the final act, in Antarctica, without Lara's backpack bursting at the seams. The Desert Eagle is one weapon you'll *definitely* want to keep in your holster.

CORE VALUES

Navigating the intricacies of each level makes it clear that Core Design really upped the ante despite having only a year's development time between games. The environments remain nothing short of remarkable. The rooftops of London are home to some unforgiving platforming, and things kick up another notch when you descend below street level to Aldwych's vast underground network. It's an ambitious location that frustrates while still remaining a firm fan favourite. Beware the darkened corners on your hunt for a well-kept secret.

Each location can almost be treated as an adventure in its own right, with each of the artefacts' 'guardians' having their own reason for wanting to obtain the item. However, much like every '90s villain, world domination and wreckage are typically at the forefront of their minds. The same goes for the totally-not-evil Willard, who betrays Lara after a gruelling trek through icy Arctic waters. Using the power of the treasures to give evolution a kick up the tush, he turns into a nightmarish boss creature.



TOMB RAIDER III
EIDOS
PlayStation

INFO

PUB Eidos Interactive

DEV Core Design

RELEASED 1998

GET IT NOW
PS1, £6.95, eBay (or in Tomb Raider I-III Remastered, PS5/PS4, £24.99, PS Store)

NEED TO KNOW

1 Don't get trigger-happy with monkeys – they'll lead you to items!

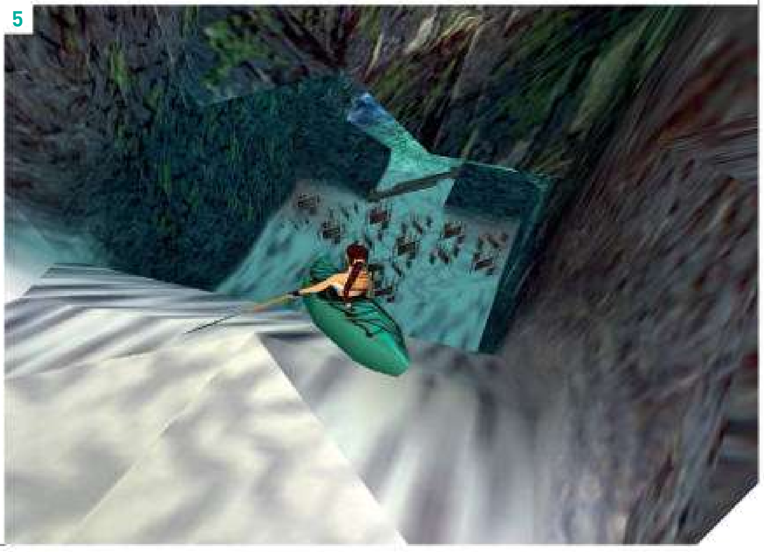
2 Collecting all of the secrets will unlock the All Hallows level.

3 Daryl Baxter's The Making of Tomb Raider has more on TRIII PS2.

Far from being grim, though, TRIII still has time for humour. The series' tongue-in-cheek dialogue and one-liners return, giving us welcome pockets of humour mid-raid.

TRIII sadly marked the final playable trip to Croft Manor. But exploring the latest home improvements is a game unto itself. Lara's added a hidden artefact room to display her wares from past quests, with one item foreshadowing the next playable escapade. There's an updated assault course and even a racetrack to zip around – 25 years on, and we *still* haven't managed to master the absolute death-trap that is the quad bike. But don't worry, we're able to lock Winston away to chill out.

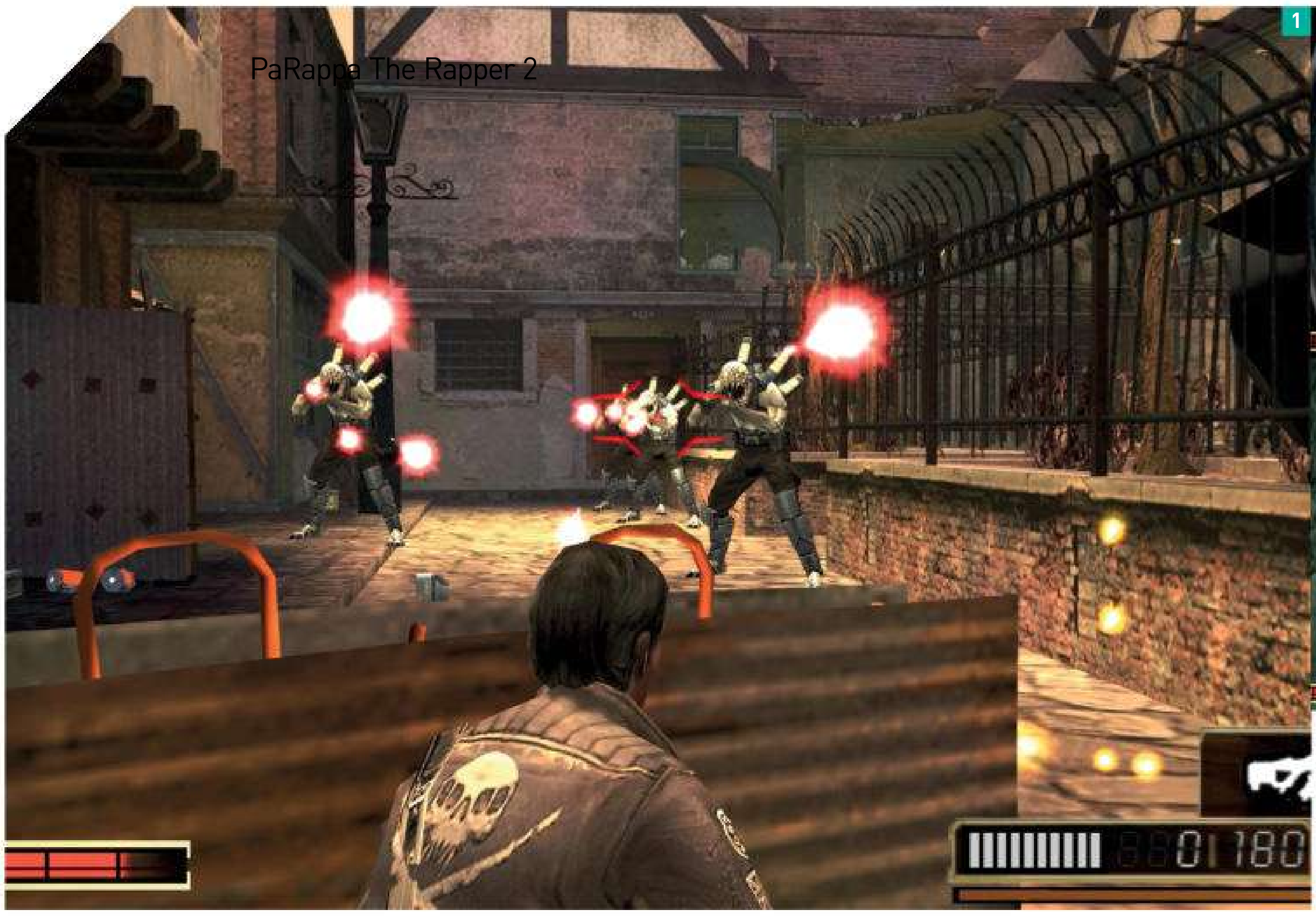
Arguably one of the toughest games in the series, and one of its high points, Tomb Raider III deserves its prominent place in Lara's history. Not only does the journey test her, it challenges you as well. And with 25 trips around the sun under its belt, it's clear why it's worth yet another play. ■

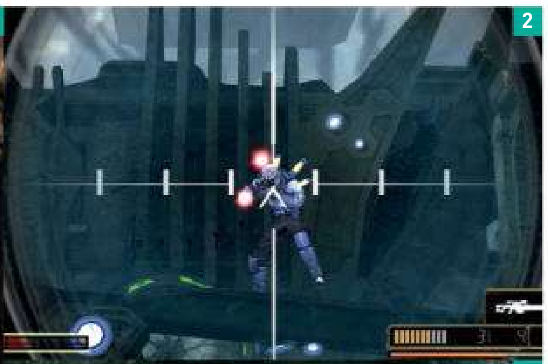


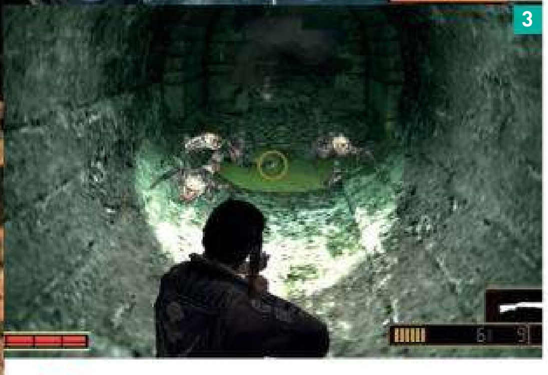
PLUS POINTS

Resistance: Retribution

A reminder of why we were loving the alien (invasion)







1 There's a basic cover system, but no regenerating health – so make use of it! **2** Activating the Fareye's time-slowing abilities turns everything a bit blue, because why not? **3** These things scuttle towards you en masse; the exception to the rule.

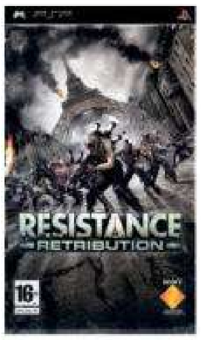
Now *this* is an interesting one, for several reasons. Even aside from the connection to the PS3 Resistance games, taken in isolation, Retribution is remarkable for its stunningly cheesy writing and acting. We're talking immense Garth Marenghi vibes, to the point where we're genuinely unsure whether it's intentionally bad or not.

We could talk (and talk, and talk) about the writing and performances all day, but there's more to dig into. For one thing, Retribution's PSP origins mean that it differs from the PS3 trilogy in some ways. It's viewed in third- rather than first-person, and the lack of twin sticks on Sony's doomed handheld[1] means enemies are more forgiving. Most show no interest in getting close to you, and those that do amble forwards at a casual pace.

RESISTANCING QUEEN

It still has some things in common with the big-screen games, of course. It's still based in the real world in an alternate timeline, now in Paris.[2] The most important thing that it has in common with the mainline games – and a large part of the reason why it remains not only playable but actively enjoyable in 2024 – is the weaponry.

Retribution is a sign of the potential that the Resistance series never quite managed to live up to (the final game, Resistance 3, hit shelves all the way back in 2011). Immediately familiar guns are given a new twist with alternate fire. The Fareye sniper rifle essentially has bullet time – okay, not revolutionary, but cool nonetheless. The LAARK rocket launcher, meanwhile, allows you to pause a launched rocket mid-air, and change the direction of its flight, while the Razor assault rifle enables you to charge up, then launch, a ricocheting energy blade. Plenty of fun, futuristic toys to play with that no number of Vaseline-smeared PSP cutscenes can take away from.



INFO

PUB Sony
DEV Bend Studio
RELEASED 2009

FOOTNOTES **1** Though this could use a PS3 controller, so your DualShock/DualSense will be recognised. **2** The first featured Manchester Cathedral, much to the CofE's anger.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

IT'S A GREAT SPIN OFF, I WISH WE GOT ANOTHER STORY FROM THIS INSTEAD OF THE PS VITA TITLE."
Dom Corroboy

AWESOME GAME"
Joe Dibb

AWFUL, SO FORGETTABLE."
Ben Bubb

▷ Found! **Jak & Daxter: The Lost Frontier** jumps from PSP to PS Plus

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
Stealth games

Let us walk you through these. Quietly

1998's Metal Gear Solid was the first fully 3D entry in the Metal Gear series, which started in 1987 on Sony's MSX2.

Thief began on PC in 1998 (with Thief: The Dark Project). Only the 2014 reboot made it to PlayStation, coming to PS4.

Alien: Isolation (PS4, 2014) rejected the action approach typical for Alien games in favour of tough stealth. It *worked*.

Among Us started life as a mobile game in 2018. The Syphon Filter (PS1, 1999) dev previously made Bubsy 3D. **Manhunt (PS2, 2003) is still banned in multiple countries today.** Chicken Run on PS1 (2000) was, unexpectedly, heavy on stealth.

EASY CELL

The *other* big stealth game

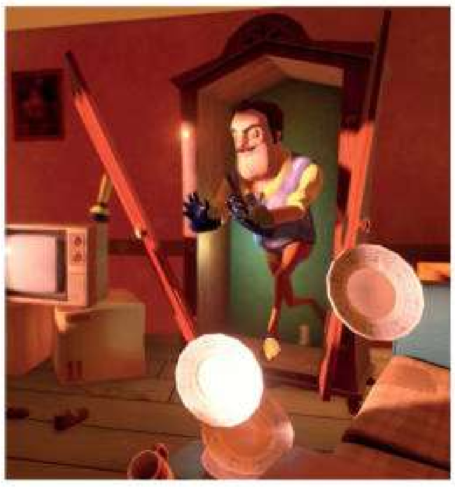
While we wait for the remake to emerge from the shadows, it's worth remembering how much Splinter Cell popularised. The use of light and shadow to dictate how visible the player is, and the ability to shoot out lights, were unusual at the time. You were also encouraged to grab enemies from behind for interrogation, silent takedowns, or as human shields; all features seen often since.

Trigger a meltdown alert.
43

SPLINTER CELL WAS XBOX-EXCLUSIVE IN 2002, BUT CAME TO PS2 IN 2003. XBOX EXCLUSIVES GOING MULTIFORMAT, EH?

SULEIDY
15/25

Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew (2023) was Mimimi Games' final work.



The phenomenon Hello Neighbor, popular with kids, came to PS4 in 2018.

Everyone's fave princess Carrie Fisher recorded lines for Dishonored included as an Easter egg, not widely known until her death in 2016.

Dapper killer-for-hire Agent 47 first infiltrated the world of PlayStation in 2002 with Hitman 2: Silent Assassin. We've had every game since.

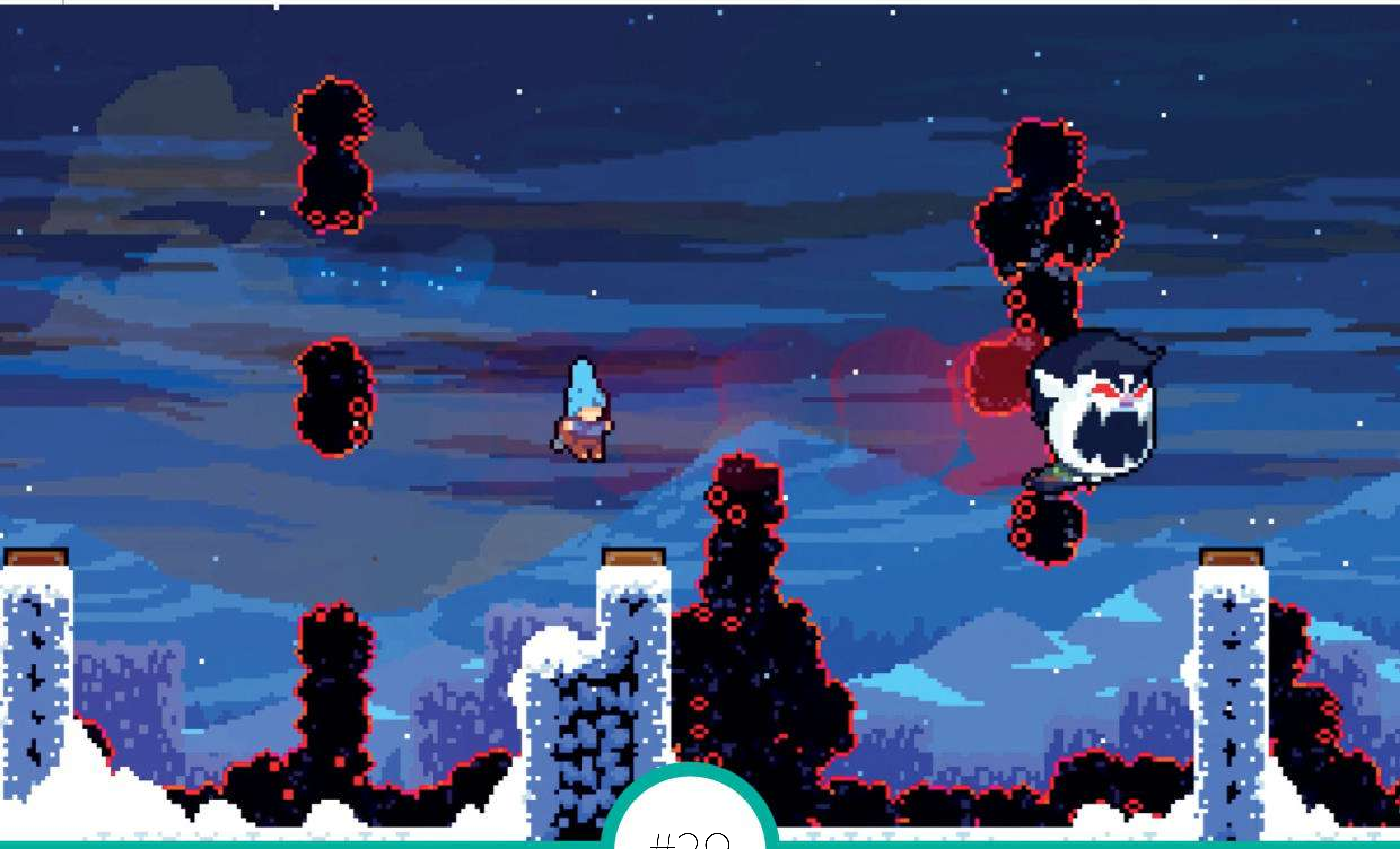
CAMERA
R2 POSTER
R3 UNLOCKED
L1 SCAN
L2 POWER
Pickpocket

I SPY

Hope you're not camera shy

In République (PS4, 2016; PSVR, 2022) you don't directly control the protagonist. Instead, you help her from afar with the help of hacking and omnipresent cameras in the game world's totalitarian state. It's surely not a coincidence that three cast members (David Hayter, Jennifer Hale, and Khary Payton) have also worked on MGS games.

▷ Next issue: déjà vu? No, it's the history of **reboots**



#39

Host with the ghost

Surviving inside **Celeste**'s hotel is tricky enough; try escaping with an enraged spectral manager in pursuit

FORMAT PS4 / **PUB** MADDY MAKES GAMES / **DEV** MADDY MAKES GAMES / **RELEASED** 2018

Mr Oshiro simply wants to keep his hotel running, which surely isn't too much to ask. Well, except that the place is run down, messy, and deserted, and Oshiro is a ghost. Despite doing all he can to make Celeste's protagonist Madeline feel at home when she dings his reception bell, then, he's set for crushing disappointment.

Most of Celeste's resort level is set within the hotel, with Madeline navigating through each screen around a nasty sludge that coats walls and grows underfoot. As with every part of Celeste, the precise arrangement of platforms, switches, springboards, and walls is a work of evil genius, forcing you to jump, grab, and dash with accuracy and speed, most likely dying and quick restarting multiple times for every inch of progress. While Madeline is trying to help Oshiro clear up the place, however, she ultimately rejects his offer to stay the night, and that only makes things worse.

Faced with another row of screens, and more sludge, attempting to leave the hotel introduces an extra threat. Crushed by his sense of failure, the ghostly manager gives chase, flying towards you with fanged mouth agape. Now you face similar kinds of platform challenges as before, but with Oshiro swooping across the screen every few seconds. Your timing and control has to be better than ever, not only to squeeze through gaps between ping-ponging balls of sludge, but to do it when the coast is clear. Still, all's well that ends well, and Oshiro eventually calms down. ■

TIME TO PLAY? The Celestial Resort is the third level in Celeste, about a third of the way through the main story. By the time you arrive, you should be used to the challenge, and understand that overcoming Madeline's psychological travails is no easy task.

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PLAY

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DAWNTRAIL

To new horizons – what to expect from the latest stunning expansion!

HOW TO GET STARTED

Where to begin as a new player, how to connect to the community, outfits, and more!

14 FOR 14

The greatest moments from the massive RPG epic, ranked!

NEW HORIZONS

Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail marks a new era for the MMORPG epic – here are the eight biggest reasons you should be excited to hop aboard

I

New besties

Beginning a new adventure calls for new pals to show us the way, and the Warrior Of Light has already started making firm friends with some of the new cast. Wuk Lamat is a bold and gregarious Hrothgar who favours fighting with a giant axe and is petitioning you for aid in a competition for the throne. We'll also get the chance to know the stoic gleaner Erenville better after he became a surprise favourite during Endwalker. Our scholarly friend Krile, who's been relegated to the sidelines since Heavensward, will also be joining us on the front lines for the first time, now showing off her Pictomancer skills.

However one potential companion is a bit of a mystery – an unknown Miqo'te scholar who has secretly been studying in Old Sharlyan for quite some time, and is the adopted brother of Wuk Lamat. There's an unidentified Miqo'te on the Dawntrail poster as well, so perhaps he is waiting right under our noses!

> "ONE POTENTIAL COMPANION IS AN UNKNOWN MIQO'TE SCHOLAR WHO HAS BEEN STUDYING IN OLD SHARLYAN."

II

Rise and grind

We're finally about to hit triple digits – the big one hundred! We've come so far from the days of fighting level two ground squirrels in the Shroud. With a raised level cap comes additional abilities for each current Job to play with and loads more gear. But what we're most looking forward to are the two completely new Jobs, Viper and Pictomancer.

Viper is a physical damage-dealing class that uses two blades for fast attacks, but then combines them into a single weapon for more forceful strikes. It reminds us a lot of Zidane from FFIX. Pictomancer is a mage class that also focuses on dishing out pain, but uses magical paint to do so, the practitioner 'drawing' spells and creatures to attack on their behalf. It's a unique job that had previously only appeared in FFVI, but fits perfectly into the world of FFXIV. We'll also be getting a third Beastmaster Job as a special Job that works a little like Blue Mage, but it's still very much a mystery to how it will handle in practice.

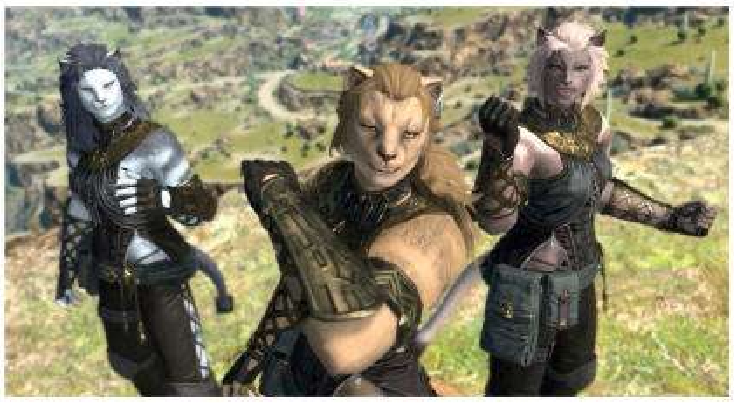
The new Pictomancer Job brings extra colour to combat.

III

Feeling fierce

After a lot of waiting and online pestering, players will finally be able to take the form of a female Hrothgar when Dawntrail launches this summer. Unlike the male Hrothgar, the female version stands tall and proud and has a very athletic build. It makes for a nice change from the cute look of other races such as Miqo'te and female Xaela.

However, they very nearly *were* cute – one of the sweeter proposed designs from the dev team proved popular. "I was quite torn when I was thinking about which type to go for," Naoki Yoshida recently told us in an interview. "But when I thought about the typical characteristics of a female Hrothgar, I thought there should already be some notion of them being strong and nimble, but I eventually went for the current version, which you see now." We're thankful he picked the stronger-looking version!



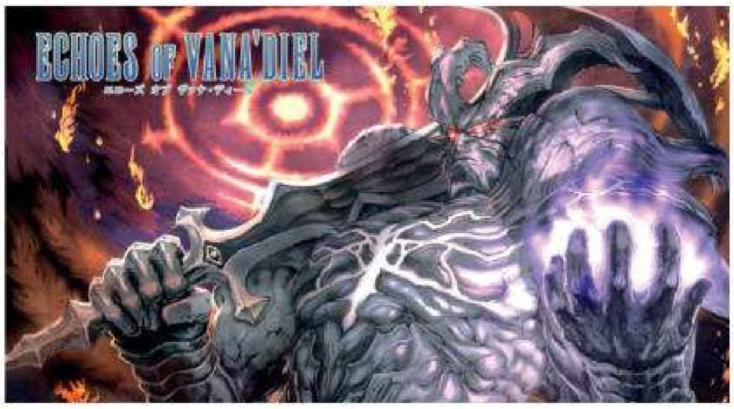
We like cute – but we also like having an athletic option too.

IV

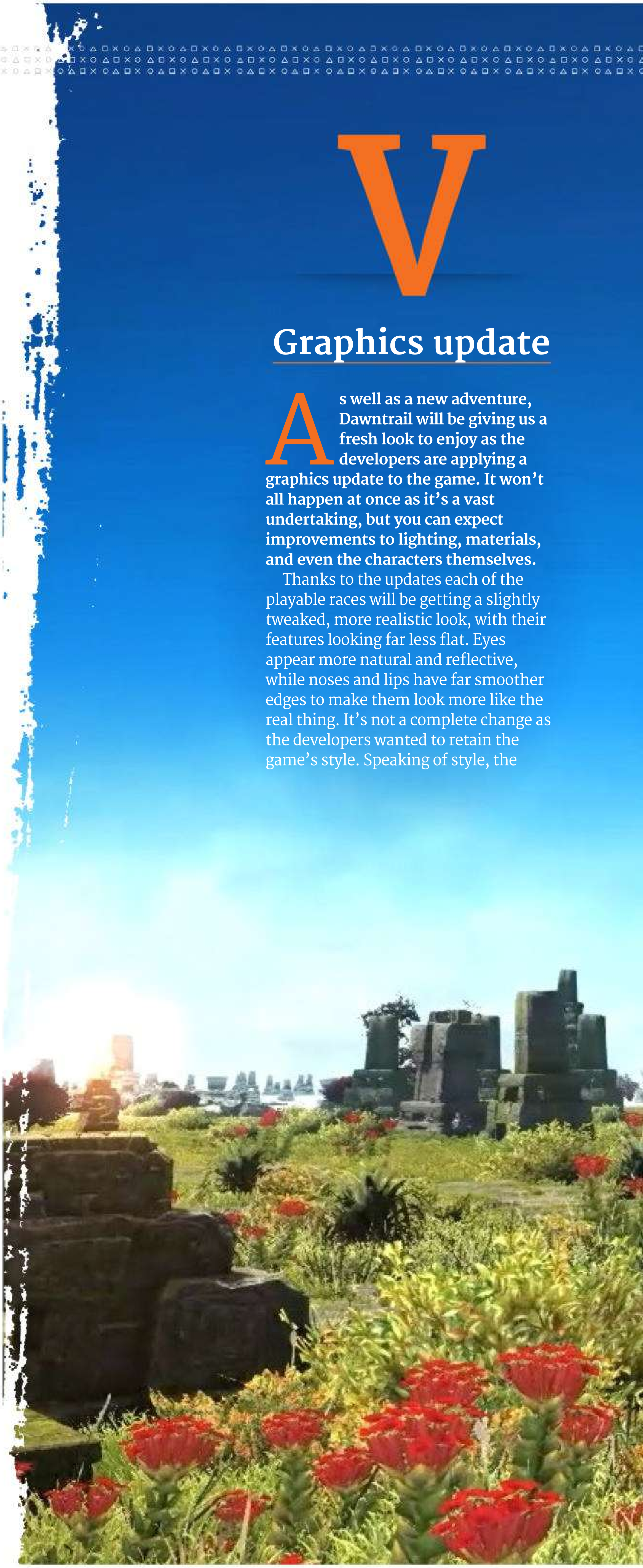
Vana'diel raid

FFXIV isn't the only Final Fantasy MMORPG – FFXI has been ticking along since 2002 and still has a dedicated playerbase despite having to compete with its younger sibling. The two crossed over in the past for a seasonal event in FFXIV that saw you getting some Amatsu armour. We also saw the game's influence in the Eureka area during Stormblood, but in Dawntrail we'll be getting something more substantial: a full alliance raid series called Echoes Of Vana'diel.

Unlike previous allusions to the older MMORPG, these raids should have more of a focus on story elements, giving FFXIV players a chance to see what they may have missed out on with XI. Each raid will have 24 participants and be released in three waves during Dawntrail's later patches. With over 20 years of history to draw on, it should be something special.



Two huge MMORPGs combine, and we're looking forward to it.



V

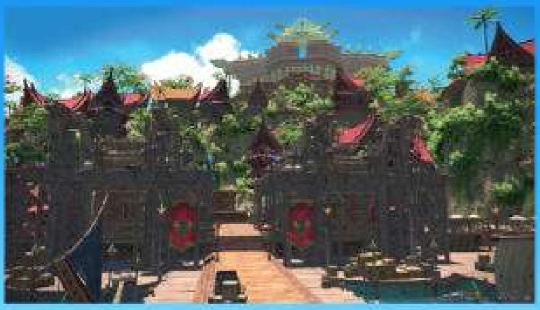
Graphics update

As well as a new adventure, Dawntrail will be giving us a fresh look to enjoy as the developers are applying a graphics update to the game. It won't all happen at once as it's a vast undertaking, but you can expect improvements to lighting, materials, and even the characters themselves.

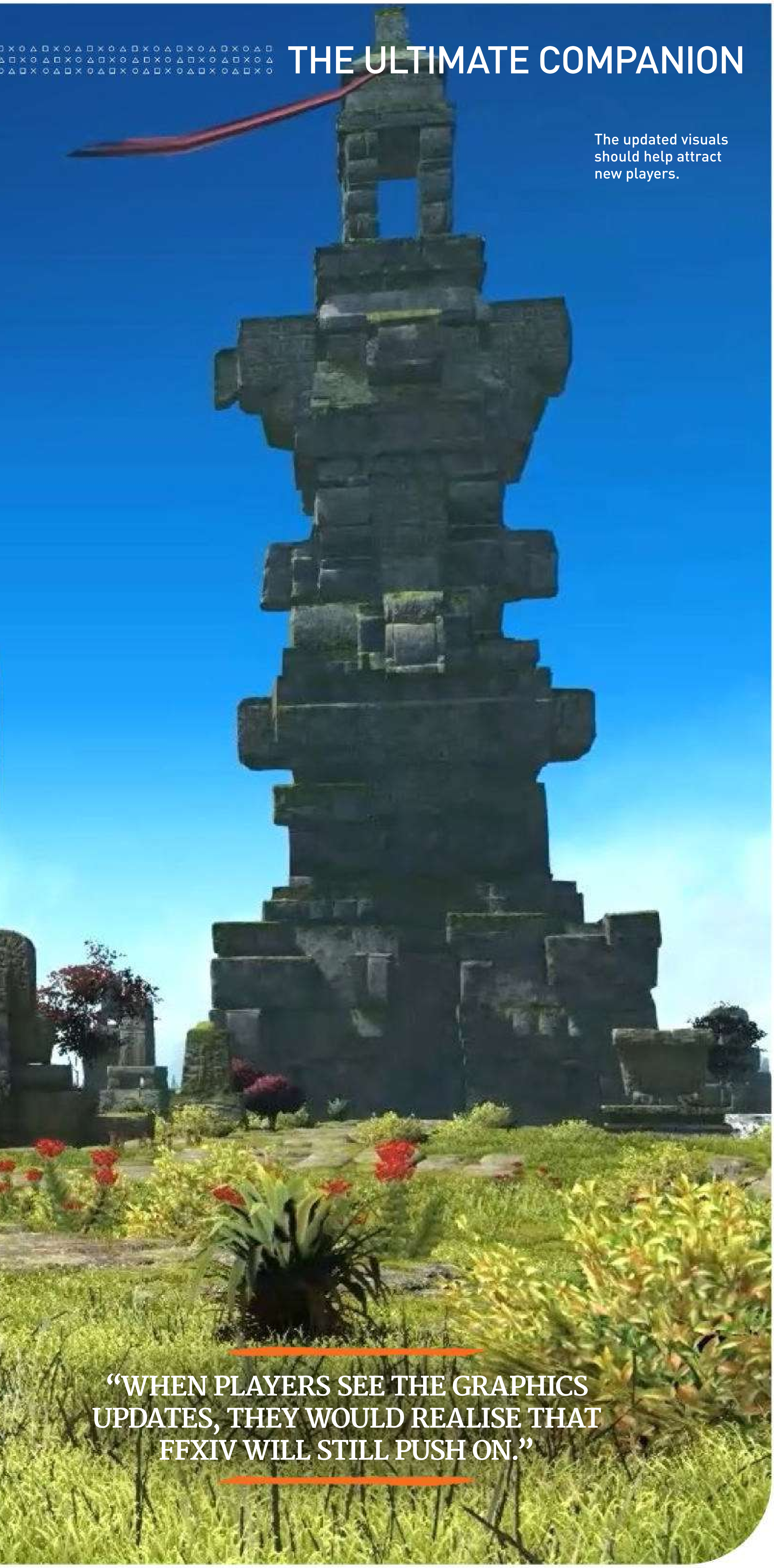
Thanks to the updates each of the playable races will be getting a slightly tweaked, more realistic look, with their features looking far less flat. Eyes appear more natural and reflective, while noses and lips have far smoother edges to make them look more like the real thing. It's not a complete change as the developers wanted to retain the game's style. Speaking of style, the updates will also mean that you'll be able to use two dyes on equipment for even more outfit customisation options.

The environment will receive major updates, the most significant being denser foliage as it's now possible to render greater numbers of plants. It will make each zone look even more alive. You'll see a difference to materials too, with metals appearing shiner and more realistic, and shadows from lighting being a lot more natural.

But why update now? "One major reason would be that with Endwalker we were able to bring one big saga to a close. I think [players] would be happy to have seen that conclusion, but I think they must have been a bit concerned about what will happen moving forward," Yoshida told us last issue. "So when players would see the graphics updates, they would realise that Final Fantasy XIV will still push on and it will still continue driving forward to the future and take on new challenges."



With denser foliage, FFXIV's trees and other plant life should look incredibly lush.

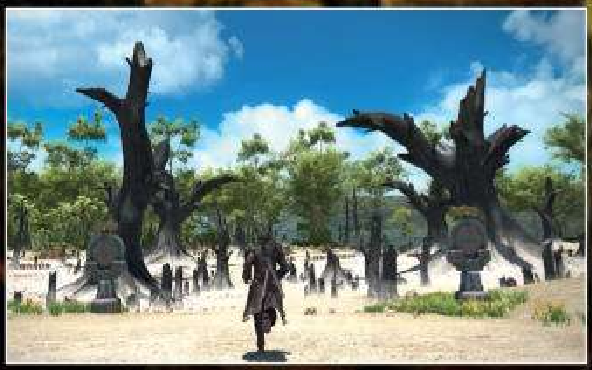


The updated visuals should help attract new players.

"WHEN PLAYERS SEE THE GRAPHICS UPDATES, THEY WOULD REALISE THAT FFXIV WILL STILL PUSH ON."

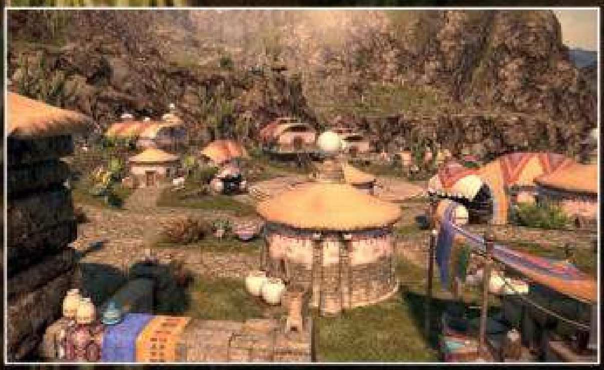
VI
New zones

The continent of Tural looks like an amazing place. With dense jungle, Wild-West-like plains, huge mountain ranges, and even a cyberpunk city, it's one of the most diverse regions we've seen so far. The region takes a lot of inspiration from South America, with the starting hub city Tuliyollal showing off the best of this through its architecture. Here's a closer look at some of the zones you'll get to explore.



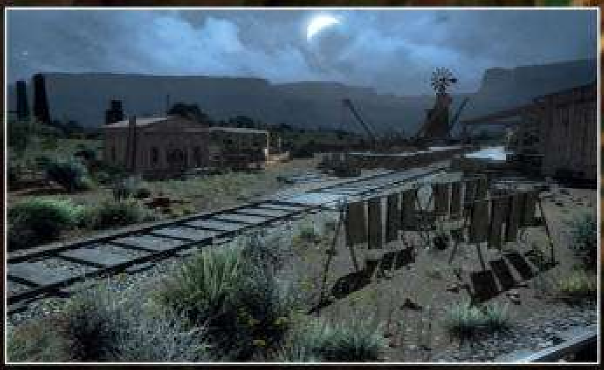
Yak T'el

This jungle area is filled with treehouses, mist, and ponds of ceruleum. It's the main home to the local Hrothgar and Mamool Ja peoples. The area is dotted with cenotes (natural sinkholes which hide springs), and is split into two layers, each with a slightly varying vibe. You'll also find evidence of past battles scattered about.



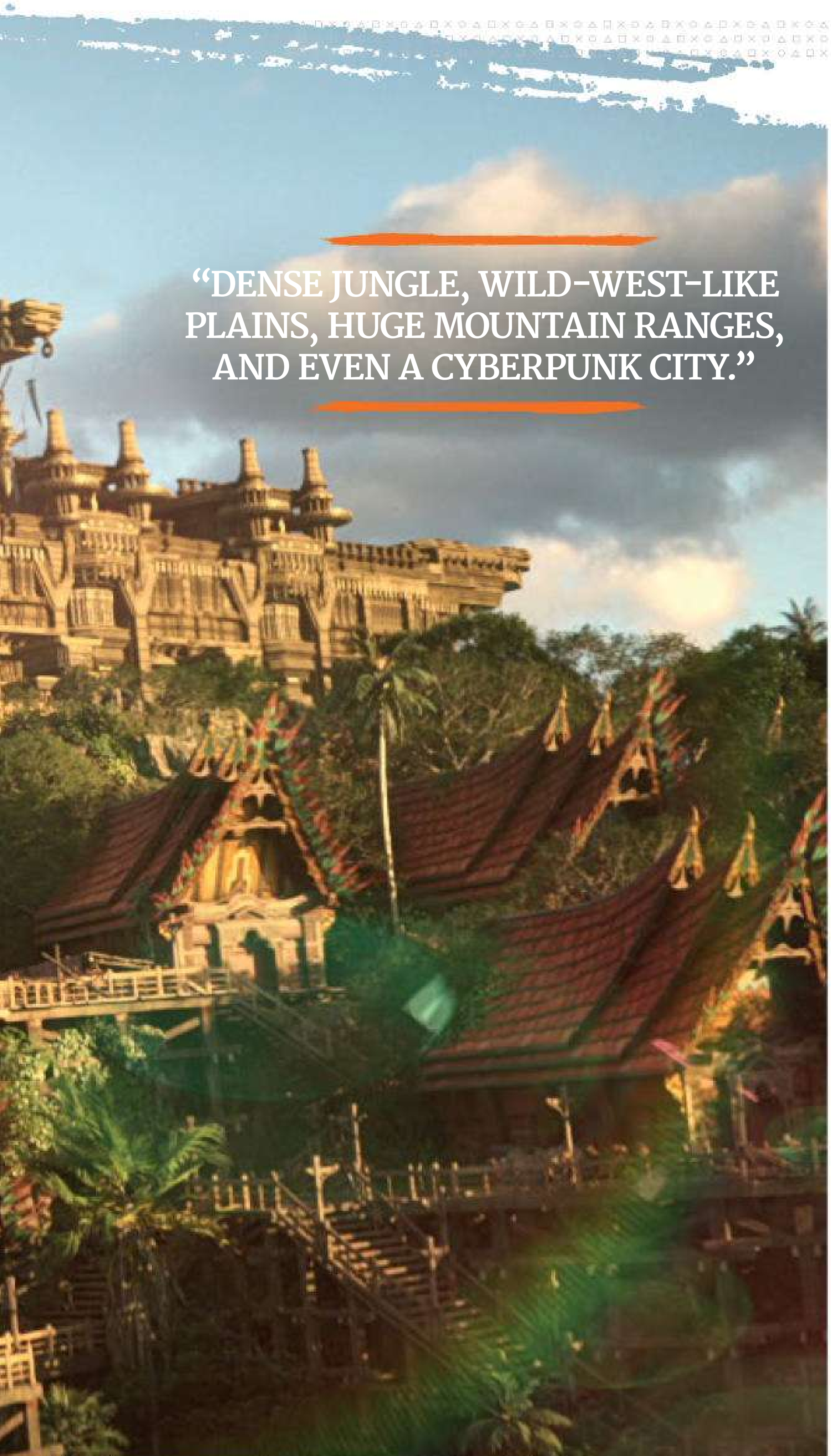
Urqopacha

This mountainous region was once home to an ancient empire of Giants, but only ruins remain. It's full of small settlements and you'll find the PeluPelu people here – one of the tribes you'll be able to get quests from. The area is full of grasses and cacti, but it also looks like where we might find the adorable alpaca mount that's been shown.



Shaalaoni

This area is significantly more arid than the others and has a Wild West vibe with wooden frontier towns and ceruleum mining structures. The rush for ceruleum has even brought a railroad to the region. However there is also a large mystery structure in this zone that is being kept hidden until release. What could it possibly be?



> "DENSE JUNGLE, WILD-WEST-LIKE PLAINS, HUGE MOUNTAIN RANGES, AND EVEN A CYBERPUNK CITY."

Kozamauka

This is a tropical region that features towering, beautiful waterfalls and rivers that snake through the trees. It's a vibrant place with colourful plants and foliage. There are several layers to the area, with paddies and buildings that make the most of the abundant water. Apparently a type of goblin has made its home here.

VII

Fighting friends

As a Warrior Of Light we've made a lot of friends over the years and have become a member of The Scions Of The Seventh Dawn, an order that fights for the future of Eorzea. While everyone might not always have been in the same location, all the members were on the same page and fighting for the same cause. However, since the order was officially disbanded at the end of Endwalker things are looking a little murkier.

Dawntrail sees us setting sail with Krile and the twins Alphinaud and Alisaie, but everyone else has their own agenda. Y'shtola is studying and G'raha is holding the fort. Estinien is off on his own adventures, which happen to be in Yok Tural, where you are, but Thancred and Urianger have accepted someone else's petition, which puts them in direct competition with you. How will our heroes navigate having to go up against their friends?

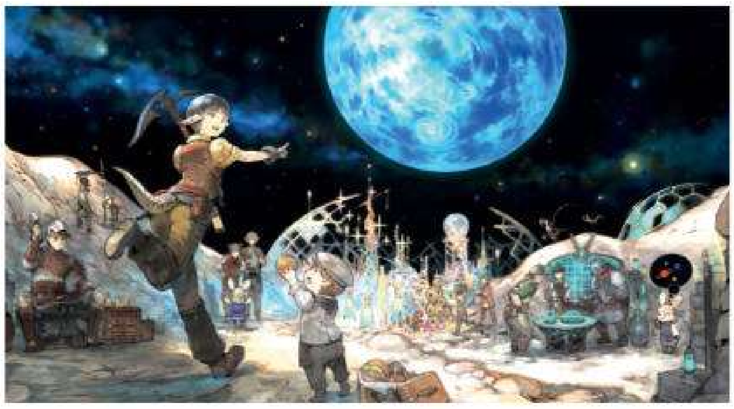
From friends to frenemies? Let's hope we don't all fall out.

VIII

Space exploration

We may have been to the moon and the far end of the universe in Endwalker, but there's much more space to explore. We'll be off to the stars in Dawntrail with a new type of casual content called Cosmic Exploration that will focus more on the gathering and crafting side of things. Players will work together to advance targets in a similar way to the previous Ishgardian Restoration content.

However, unlike our endeavours to build up Ishgard, which were a run from start to finish, Cosmic Exploration promises to be more changeable: "This time we will be changing the themes and the visuals throughout as the content goes on," Yoshida told us last issue. Island Sanctuary fans don't need to worry though; he also told us that it will still continue to receive updates throughout Dawntrail too.



If crafting's your thing, you're going to love Cosmic Exploration.

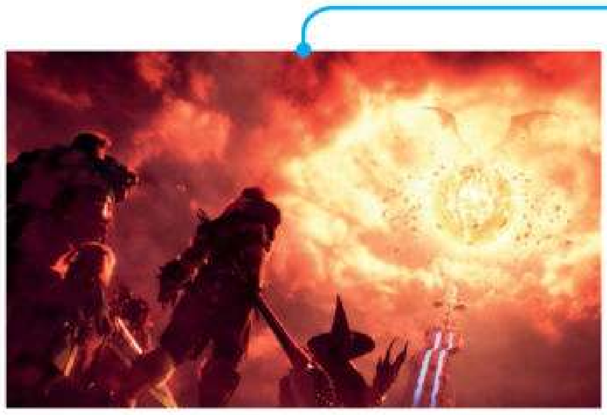
THROUGH THE YEARS

Looking back on all **Final Fantasy XIV**'s expansions and the influences that shaped the grand adventure it is today

VERSION 2.0

A Realm Reborn

The adventures of the Warrior Of Light all started here, on the back of a chocobo cart. The early stages of A Realm Reborn are all about getting your hands on any job you can, be that slaying ladybirds or carting around fertiliser. That very traditional, almost cosy, fantasy start helps introduce you to the foundations of the world you'll eventually be saving. Soon you're trusted to oust pirates, fight Primal gods, and put an end to the invading empire's plans. Of course you discover there's a darker threat orchestrating things behind the scenes, and so the seeds for the epic Zodiark vs Hydaelyn saga are sown.



1.0 before the fall

You can't talk about FFXIV as it is today without looking at the version that came before it. After a rough start on PC the developers decided that they'd start the game anew… by dropping a moon on everything that came before. That one cataclysmic event that ended the 1.0 version of the game set the scene for A Realm Reborn. As you travel you'll see giant crystals dotting the landscape where Bahamut ravaged the land, and hear stories from NPCs of the horrors they faced at that time. The old game is long gone, but echoes of it can be felt throughout Eorzea.

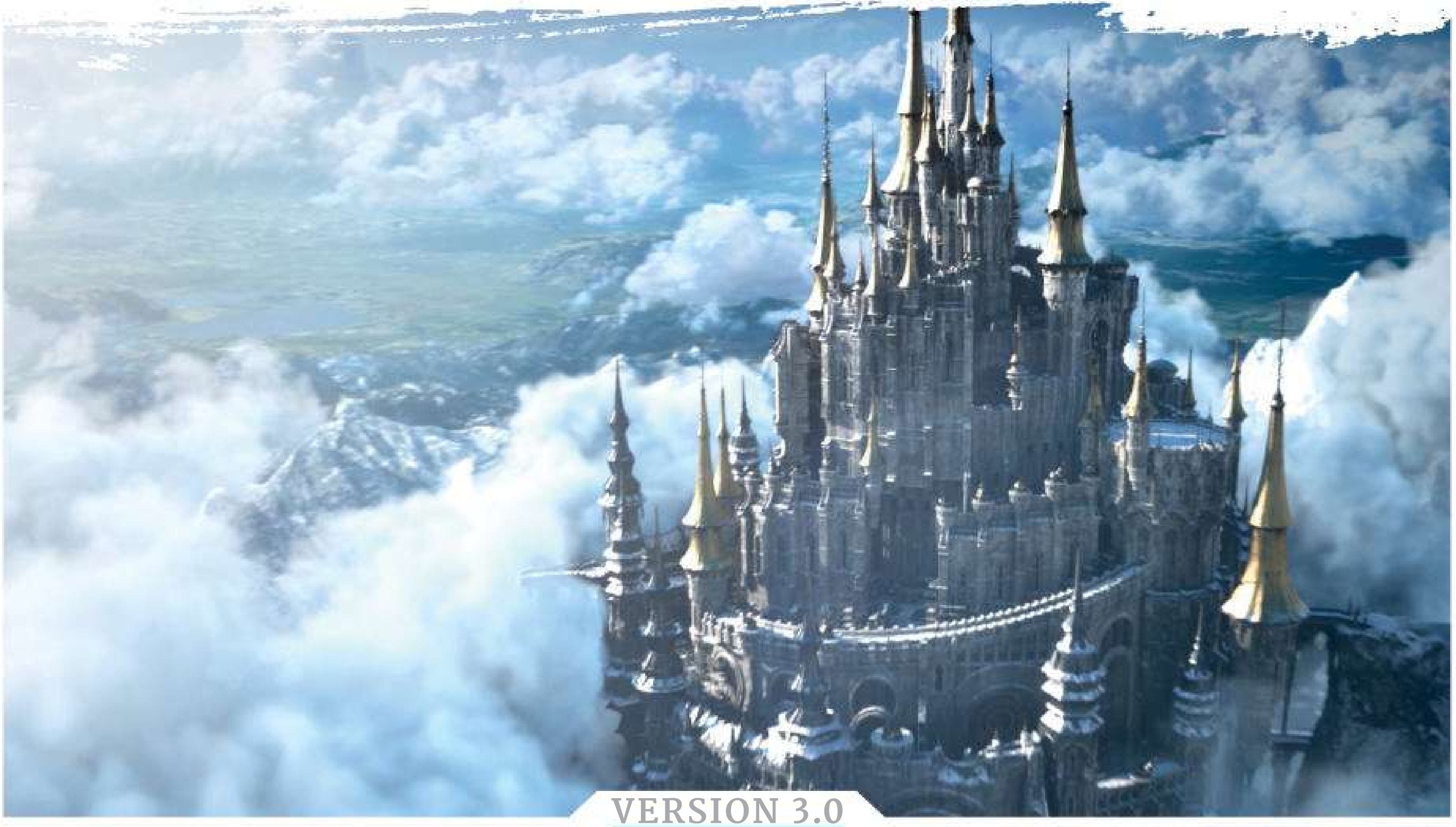
Gilgamesh

This wandering swordsman first appeared in Final Fantasy V as an antagonist, but since then has appeared in most FF games in various forms – a powerful summon, an optional boss, or even an ally – but always as a weapon collector. In FFXIV he's still engaged in finding special weapons, but gets embroiled in the comedic antics of Gentleman Inspector Hildibrand and is given a new name: Greg. He still sports his red outfit and face paint from his original appearance, and even his fights occur in familiar places, such as 'Battle Of The Big Bridge'.

Magitek

Final Fantasy VI's opening scenes of robotic armour trudging through the snow was a huge influence on FFXIV, with the Magitek of FFVI being reflected in the design of the Garlean Empire. Unable to use traditional magic, the Garleans built Magitek instead. You can find several Magitek designs from FFVI in FFXIV, including the one from the game's opening, but the most memorable is the one based on Yoshitaka Amano's original art for the machines that Terra is often pictured riding. (It never actually appeared in the original game.)

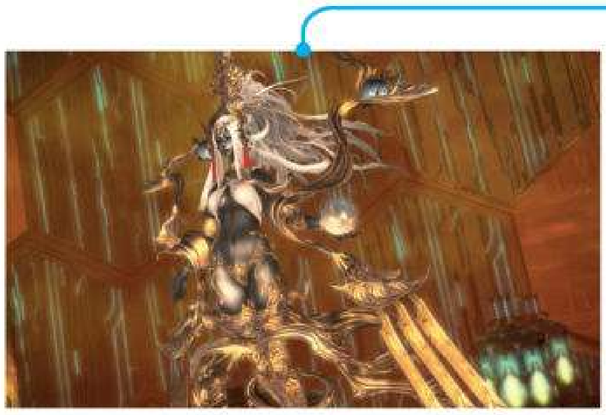
> “YOU TAKE REFUGE IN THE CITY OF ISHGARD, WHERE YOU GET PULLED INTO A MILLENNIA-LONG WAR.”



VERSION 3.0

Heavensward

After you're falsely accused of murder, and many of your friends vanish while escaping, things look pretty down at the start of Heavensward. You take refuge in the city of Ishgard, where you get pulled into the millennia-long war between the Holy See Of Ishgard and the dragons of Dravania. The fearsome Nidhogg has started attacking again so you set about trying to negotiate with the dragons to stop the conflict, while in the background the Ascians try to urge the war on to bring about disaster. The overarching background threat starts to ramp up here, and the expansion also introduced flying mounts.

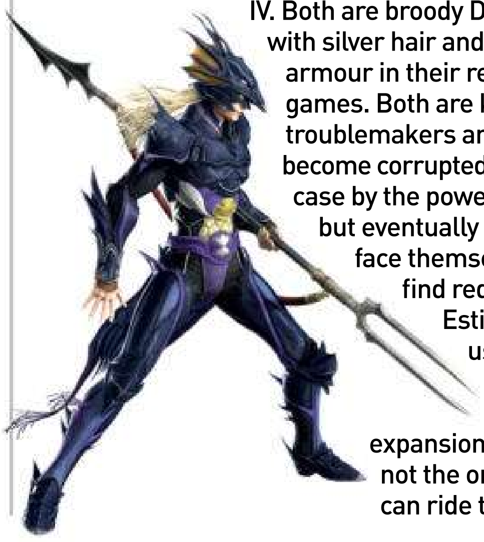


The Warring Triad

Another big influence from FFVI, the Warring Triad was a trio of gods who fought each other and turned humans into espers to fight for them, but eventually turned themselves into statues to put an end to the chaos. Kefka gets his hands on them and seizes their power to cause the cataclysm. In FFXIV they're also found in statue form after being captured by an ancient civilisation called the Allagans. The Ascians had planned to use their power, but were ultimately foiled. You get to face them as part of a series of side-quests, though.

Estinien

While there are plenty of Easter eggs from other FF games hidden in XIV, it's rare for an integral character to be so strongly influenced by one. Estinien (a famed Dragoon of Ishgard, and one of the main characters in Heavensward) takes a lot of cues from Kain Highwind (left) from Final Fantasy IV. Both are broody Dragoons with silver hair and the coolest armour in their respective games. Both are known troublemakers and both become corrupted, in Estinien's case by the power of Nidhogg, but eventually they have to face themselves and find redemption. Estinien even uses some of Kain's lines in later expansions: “You're not the only ones who can ride the wind!”



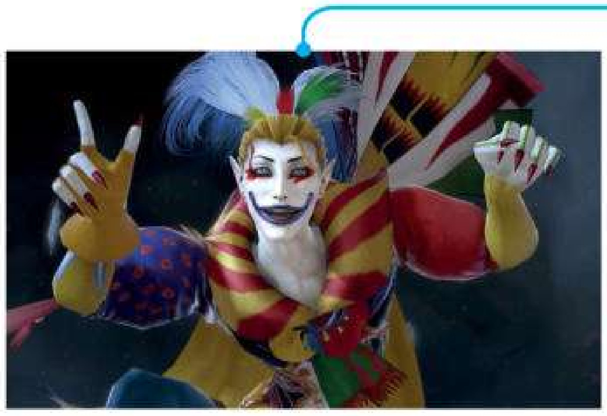
Knights Of The Round

An iconic summon from FFVII, Knights Of The Round is a secret that can only be reached by breeding a golden chocobo. It features 13 knights based on Arthurian legend and is one of the most badass summons from the whole series, despite never appearing in the games again… until XIV gave it top billing as the final boss in the Heavensward expansion. Archbishop Thordan uses the power of Nidhogg's eyes to transform himself into a mighty Godking alongside 12 of his followers to give you one of the coolest-looking fights in the entire game.

VERSION 4.0

Stormblood

Remember the Magitek-powered Garlean Empire from A Realm Reborn? It's back, and this time its citizens have brought a psychotic new antagonist with them. Zenos has a love of both murder and one-upping Sephiroth's hair care regime. Stormblood is all about rebellion and fighting the Garleans once and for all on two different fronts – Ala Mhigo, which borders on Eorzea, and Doma to the far east. Of course, behind the scenes the Garleans are still being manipulated by the nefarious Ascians to resurrect their god, Zodiark. By fighting on both fronts, you're able to split the enemy forces and eventually reclaim both countries in the name of freedom by defeating Zenos… Sort of. Huzzah!



Final Fantasy VI

The influence of FFVI on this expansion can be seen all over the place, both with the location of Doma being overtaken by imperials, and through several fights in the Omega raid series. As the robotic Omega evaluates your abilities, it brings forth several enemies from legend, including Doomtrain and Kefka himself. Unfortunately you can't suplex Doomtrain in FFXIV so you have to settle for kicking the steam out of it, but the Kefka fight is a highlight. Playing into his jester-like personality, the fight often tries to trick you into doing the wrong thing if you're not paying close enough attention. Tackle the extreme version of this fight and you'll even get to face his god form – what a throwback!

Ivalice

The shared world of both FFXII (above) and Tactics has a huge impact on XIV, with a whole area of the map being named Ivalice after it. The earlier games even share locations and historical figures that you get to explore through the Ivalice raid series. You also get to meet the first Viera introduced in FFXIV – the famous Fran from FFXII. Technically this Ivalice isn't the same shared world as the originals, but it does mirror it, including the Zodiac gods. The developers even brought back director Yasumi Matsuno, the creator of Ivalice as a setting, to oversee the FFXIV raids' development.

Red Mage

The classic Red Mage, a staple of the series and a class that's unique to the Final Fantasy series, was finally introduced as a new Job in Stormblood. It was one of the first roles ever created for the series, debuting in the very first Final Fantasy (above). Even then the developers knew the design was a winner as it's retained its red hat and rapier combo in every entry. FFXIV's version naturally rocks the classic look, and sees you juggling both white and black magic alongside physical attacks to help it retain its versatility. It can even revive other players, despite being a damage-dealing class, which makes it extremely handy in a pinch – even if it's not as strong as other Jobs.

> "FFVI'S INFLUENCE ON THIS EXPANSION CAN BE SEEN ALL OVER THE PLACE."

“HERE YOU MEET THE ASCIAN PULLING THE STRINGS BEHIND EVERYTHING.”

VERSION 5.0

Shadowbringers

After the souls of several of your companions are accidentally summoned to a parallel world called The First (a mishap that could happen to anyone, right?), you eventually manage to follow and find a world on the brink of collapse asking for your aid. It's overcome by light, which has almost entirely overrun the planet to the point that it's never dark, The First is looking for a Warrior Of Darkness to reset the balance. It's here where you properly meet Emet-Selch – the Ascian pulling the strings behind everything else you've seen so far. It turns out he's been orchestrating apocalypses on all the different reflections of your world in order to bring them all together again and bring back his countrymen. You can't blame him – he's been lonely for thousands upon thousands of years – but you need to put a stop to him to save your own existence.

Final Fantasy VII

Quite a lot of different aspects of Shadowbringers are influenced by FFVII, like the concept of all things returning to the Lifestream (Aetherial Sea in FFXIV), but also the City Of The Ancients. In FFVII it's home to a race known as the Ancients and has strong underwater themes throughout, while in Shadowbringers the city is instead called Amarout, but is found underwater and is also home to a race known as the Ancients. In the finale you go up against Emet-Selch as Hades, who is modelled after the Hades in FFVII. There's even a little nod to Sephiroth and Nibelheim, and he disappears into a wall of flame.

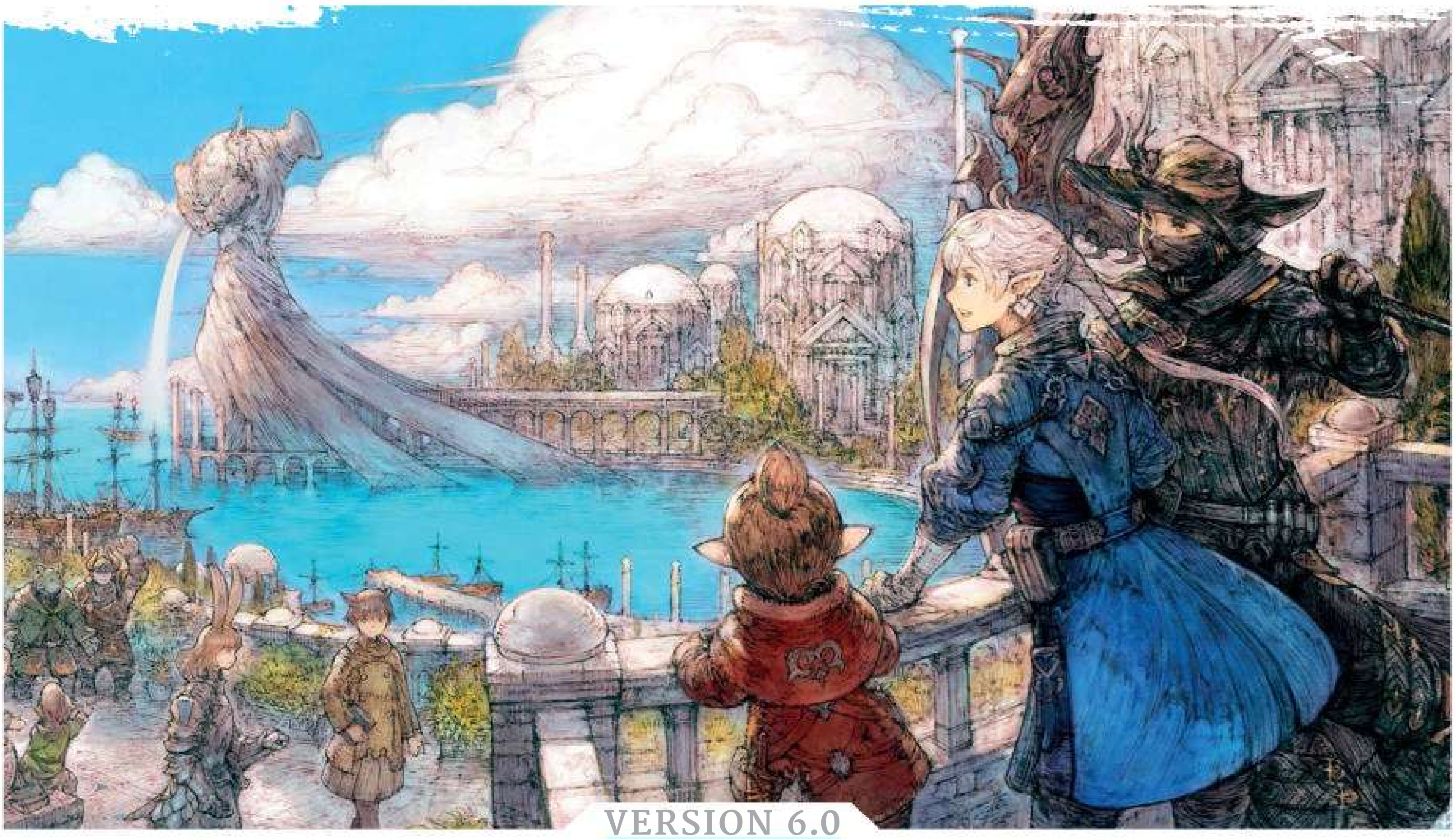
Final Fantasy VIII

There hadn't been much in the way of FFVIII references in the game up to this point, but then Shadowbringers came along and gave us some fantastic nods to the adventures of Squall and co. The Gunbreaker job was introduced with this expansion and was entirely inspired by the Gunblade weapon that both Squall and Seifer use. We also got the Eden raid series, which is basically a big FFVIII party aboard the Guardian Force of the same name. At the end of all of the fights there's an homage to FFVIII's ending with Gaia hearing Ryne's voice before appearing in a gorgeous field of flowers – just like Squall and Rinoa. D'awwwww.

The Crystal Tower

Technically The Crystal Tower first appears in A Realm Reborn as a raid, but it becomes pivotal to the story in Shadowbringers as it contains a portal that allows you to cross between worlds. In A Realm Reborn you can confront resurrected emperor Xande and even The Cloud Of Darkness, just like in Final Fantasy III, as part of the raid. However, in Shadowbringers the tower utterly dominates the scenery as home to one of the last major cities on The First. We also learn how the Xande of FFXIV was yet another puppet of the machiavellian Emet-Selch. So FFIII's influence is being used to deepen the history of FFXIV's world.

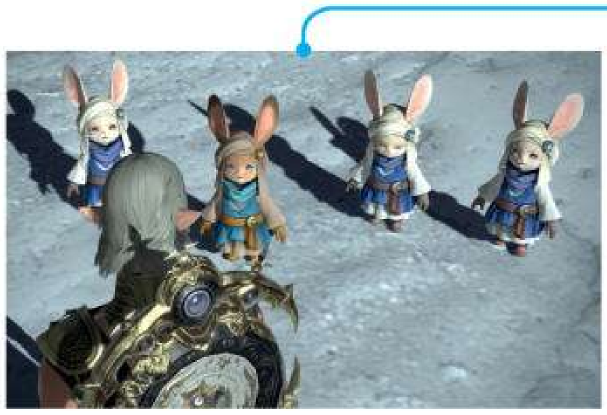
"TRAVEL TO THE EDGE OF THE UNIVERSE AND FIND THE EMBODIMENT OF DESPAIR."



VERSION 6.0

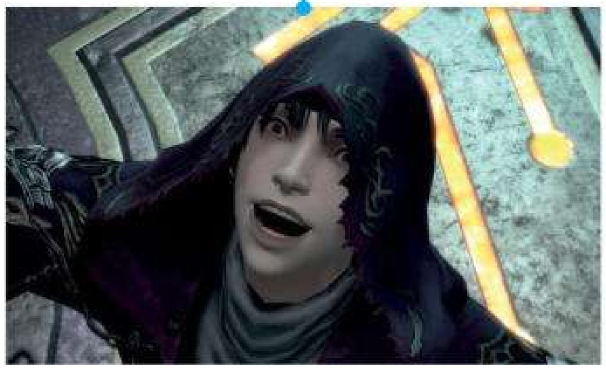
Endwalker

This is the last expansion in the Zodiark vs Hydaelyn saga, and brings ten years' worth of expansions to a close. After not quite dying in Stormblood, Zenos survives, along with a lone, fractured Ascian. Zenos just wants to fight you, my friend – the one person able to give him a battle high – while Fandaniel wants to end everything so that he can finally die too as an apocalypse called The Final Days descends upon the world, just like it did upon the Ancients. With Zodiark released and defeated and Hydaelyn revealing her part in it all as you uncover what set the Final Days in motion, it's up to you to travel to the edge of the universe and find the embodiment of despair that started it all. It makes for one hell of an ending chapter.



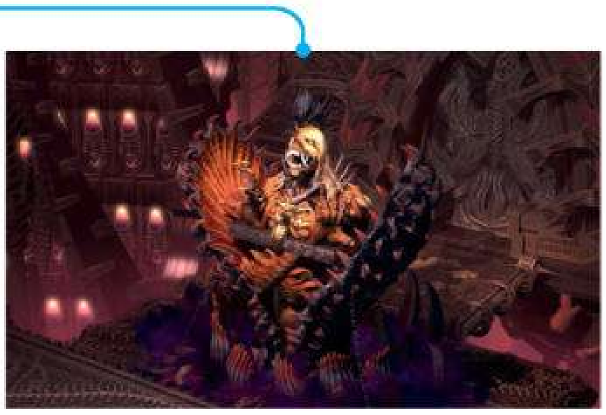
Final Fantasy IV

Shadowbringers leaned right into a lot of things from FFIV, the biggest being a trip to the moon. Much like in the fourth entry in the series you end up travelling to the lunar surface and finding a race of rabbit-like people – they even both have hidden smiley rock formations. The comparisons don't stop there though; both games use the Tower Of Babil, and later patches feature a story that sees you facing off against the Archfiends and eventually Golbez and Zeromus. The story isn't quite the same, but the FFIV references are particularly strong here.



Final Fantasy IX

While not quite as prevalent as the influences of FFIV, Shadowbringers also leans on a lot of aspects of FFIX through some of its major plot points. The villain Fandaniel is very much like that game's antagonist Kuja – a being from another world who was made by a master who wanted to merge worlds. They both also have a real flair for the dramatic. The parallels don't stop there, though, as final boss Endsinger is ultimately a being born of despair and set into motion by Fandaniel/Hermes, much like the being Necron in FFIX, and both want to see everything reduced to nothingness as the ultimate form of benevolence.



Anima

Surprisingly FFXIV doesn't have that many allusions to FFX. Sure, Stormblood added swimming that felt a lot like the way Tidus and co explored Spira, but there hadn't been anything truly explicit until Shadowbringers and the introduction of one of the most terrifying summons in the series: Anima. They're even created in a similar way, through the prayer of those sealed in a state of dreaming. While the Anima of FFX was made from one person, the version in XIV is made from the dreams of the inhabitants of a whole city – grim.

Hironobu Sakaguchi (right) is a FFXIV player as well as a creator of the entire series.

The father of Final Fantasy

You could easily argue that, of anyone, Hironobu Sakaguchi has had the greatest influence on Final Fantasy XIV given that he's the creator of the series as a whole – even though he doesn't work on the games himself any more. However, things have now come full circle and Sakaguchi is an avid player of the online game. Finally the daddy of all things Final Fantasy gets to enjoy the culmination of the games he helped create.

You'll often find him tweeting about his in-game adventures. Sometimes he'll come across something in the game that leads him to reminisce on how it mirrors the original forms he was responsible for directing. You'll usually find him sharing some of Yoshitaka Amano's original Final Fantasy art and being giddy at how well it's been recreated in FFXIV. It's like one giant stroll down memory lane. He's so into it that he's even cleared the hardest ultimate fights in the game and created his own in-game fashion brand called SakaGUCCI that sees him craft clothes for people and then fight alongside them so that those clothes become bonded to that person and can't be traded. It's an inventive way to keep them as an exclusive brand.

He's also recreated an in-game development office using in-game housing, complete with a guestbook filled with comments from some of the original developers of the series. It's amazing seeing his influence on the game both as a creator of Final Fantasy and as a player.

FAN-TASTIC

At a FanFest event in London in 2023 FFXIV's director Naoki Yoshida thanked Sakaguchi for creating the series, to which Sakaguchi replied: "I'm going to thank you back for making Final Fantasy even better moving forward," which brought Yoshida to tears. It's quite a statement for the father of Final Fantasy to say that the game is even better than his own creations. It gets us excited to see how he reacts to Dawntrail later this year too.

> "IT'S AMAZING SEEING HIS INFLUENCE ON THE GAME BOTH AS A CREATOR OF FINAL FANTASY AND AS A PLAYER."

STEPPING ONTO THE DAWNTRAIL

Have you heard of the critically-acclaimed MMORPG **Final Fantasy XIV**? No? Let's help you find your sea legs, then

Q I love playing single-player RPGs, so why would I want to play an MMORPG with other people?

A Because Final Fantasy XIV is way more 'RPG' than 'MMO'. The Main Scenario Quest – an epic narrative spanning four expansions and their various patch stories – used to force you to party up with your mates to progress. However, that's changed. Over the past couple of years, Square Enix has added Duty Support to most of its mandatory dungeons.

This lets you play (mostly) solo for the majority of your journey. Even when you're forced into a four-/eight-person 'get along together' T-shirt, the game's base content is easy enough that you don't have to chat to anybody if you don't want to. Hermit to your heart's content.

Q Dawntrail looks really neat. Should I buy a story skip and get stuck in to that one straight away?

A We're not your dad, and you can do what you want – but no, probably not. Final Fantasy XIV's main draw is its story. Skipping that to get to the new stuff'll leave you confused, even though Dawntrail's meant to be the start of a new ten-year narrative arc.

A Realm Reborn, Heavensward, Stormblood, Shadowbringers, and Endwalker all form a huge part of the game's worldbuilding. Furthermore, there'll be plenty of old faces in Dawntrail. We only suggest buying the skip if you don't care about the story at all – or if you've got mates you'd like to raid with and don't mind spoilers-by-osmosis, in which case you can make a second character for story stuff.

Q Do I need to start paying for a subscription? What if I don't like it?

A No – depending on how social you'd like to be, you can go hundreds of hours without ever spending a single penny.

Final Fantasy XIV's free trial is a meme for a reason: it's obscenely generous. The base game plus two of its expansions) can be played through by free trial players, giving them dozens of hours of stellar RPG story for basically nothing. There's no timer on it, either.

There are a few limits, though, some of which could leave you feeling pretty socially isolated – such as not being able to trade or privately message other players. If you want to put your head down and play Final Fantasy XIV like a single-player RPG, though? You've got around 100 to 150 hours of free game. Dig in.

Q Okay, I'll give it a shot – but which class/Job should I start with?

A It genuinely does not matter. You can play and level up every Job on the same character, and swapping between them is as simple as changing your weapon, so you're not locked into your first choice. However, your starting class (most become Jobs when you hit level 30) determines the city in which your adventure begins.

Marauders and Arcanists start in the pirate thalassocracy of Limsa Lominsa, spread across many tiny islands. Conjurers, Lancers, and Archers start in the shaded woods of Gridania. Gladiators, Thaumaturges, and Pugilists start in the thriving desert trade city of Ul'dah, the wealthiest of all the city-states. However, you won't be locked to these initial zones for long, so there's no need to start over if you don't like the vibes in your first location.

Q What do all those classes actually do, though?

A Rather than rattle off the starting classes and their individual shticks, let's get into FFXIV's holy trinity of class/Job roles, which you may be familiar with from other online games (and even some shooters).

Final Fantasy XIV has three roles: tanks, healers, and damage dealers (sometimes called DPS). Tanks like the Marauder and Gladiator are designed to keep enemies focussed on them (called 'keeping aggro'). Healers like the Arcanist and Conjurer balance dealing damage with keeping their allies alive. Damage dealers like the Lancer, Archer, and Thaumaturge hit things very hard.

The game makes distinctions between magical, ranged physical, and melee damage dealers, but you don't need to worry about that now. Pick whichever floats your boat – you'll get a chance to try all roles out eventually.

Q Do I need to pick a crafting/gathering Job?

A Crafting/gathering Jobs in Final Fantasy XIV are basically optional. While you'll have a great time crafting things, it's not super-relevant until you reach max level. None of the gear you can make will outpace the stuff you get from dungeons and quests.

Crafting cashflow primarily comes from creating endgame gear for raiding – whenever a new set of fights is released, crafted gear is often the entry-level set, so you can make bank if you're prepared. However, newbies like yourself don't need to worry about that.

As for what to pick? Just like your combat classes/Jobs, you can level every crafting and gathering Job on the same character. Become a god of the anvil at your leisure.

Q I'm in – but there are lots of icons on my map. Where do I start?

A Quests are broken up into three types: Main Scenario Quests (that's the main story), side-quests, and feature quests (often called blue quests by the community).

Side-quests are optional. If you want to go whole-hog into the story then they'll lead you to great places, but you don't have to do them to understand what's going on.

Blue quests are marked with the appropriate colour and a plus symbol. These unlock extra features – Jobs, side-activities, dungeons, and raids. The most important ones are class/Job quests. If you *need* to do one, you'll see it under the Main Scenario Quest tracker, in the top left of your UI by default. But no matter what you pick, just get out there and have some fun.

ROLE-PLAYING GAME

Add a dash of D&D to your MMORPG – Harvey Randall rediscovers a love for Endwalker's epic tale by joining a group roleplaying the main story's quests

Even though it's in the genre's name, for plenty of MMORPG players roleplaying exists as a kind of subculture within their games, a curiosity to gawk at from afar and occasionally poke fun at (sometimes deservedly – as you'll know if you've seen the ill-advised, unofficial NSFW nightclub billboards that went up in real-life Texas and California).

But for many (myself included), roleplaying is a large part of what we love about gaming, and about writing – whether that's rolling the dice at a tabletop session or losing ourselves in videogame RPG worlds like those of Final Fantasy. So why not combine them? The FFXIV Discord server I'm a member of runs regular events as an adventurer's guild, playing out missions rather like someone might host a session of text-based D&D, only with fewer numbers and character sheets.

The event that's stuck with me the most ran for several weeks across a series of in-game sessions, delving deep into the story of Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker. The Garlean Empire is FFXIV's largest central antagonist. It's an imperialist, fascist state with a history of colonisation, oppression, and violence, that uses its technological superiority to sow chaos under the guise of saving 'savages' from themselves. It's responsible for masses of suffering in the game's story – but when we finally arrive during Endwalker, it's in ruins. Garlemald, the capital, has been obliterated by an ancient threat far greater than the empire itself.

Its citizens, who are unable to cast magic, are torn from the technology that warded off the biting cold, hounded by their mind-controlled kin, and completely helpless. It's a grim and surprisingly nuanced storyline, which delves into what it means to deradicalise desperate yet indoctrinated people.

FFXIV: ENDWALKER
SPOILER WARNING

The series of events we roleplayed as a server were set in Garlemald – but in a time bubble, before the Warrior Of Light

1

2

1 Roleplaying allows you to explore the setting in more depth. 2 It's a great way to build bonds with other players, away from the main quest. 3 Garlemald makes a memorable location. 4 This is just one way the community comes together to add depth.

arrived to save the day. In a word? It *ruled*. It felt like I was writing a whole side-story with my mates, opening a window into the lives of ordinary folk.

STORY TELLING

We spoke with the players who ran those sessions, Fern and Sven. Both players have been roleplaying for over a decade. “Roleplaying is my main consideration when I'm looking to get into an MMORPG,” says Fern, who ran the lion's share of the sessions with Sven's assistance. “I play the game as well, but my main priority has always been how interesting it would be to write in a setting.”

Sven agrees, noting that, “Like Fern, a game's potential for roleplay is my main draw as well, and I tend to focus on that more than gameplay.”

> “ROLEPLAY AT ITS CORE IS [...] APPRECIATING THE WORLD.”

Fern says that the events themselves were inspired by an Endwalker quest called In From The Cold, wherein the Warrior Of Light gets their soul plonked in the body of a helpless Garlean, eventually overwhelmed even if their player makes no mistakes.

“I wanted to capture that feeling and translate it to a roleplay campaign, for our characters to feel that same helplessness and despair [...] I felt it would be interesting to find out how they'd respond to seeing Garlemald in ruin, its people brought to their knees, at the brink of annihilation.”

“We wanted it to be quite raw,” Sven agrees, “to really soak in the terror of the devastation the Garleans went through [...] In other words, we wanted to be there [in Garlemald] before things were getting ‘fixed’.”

While the Warrior Of Light does struggle with the grim reality of Garlemald in Endwalker's storyline, you're still ultimately there to make things better – and you succeed in doing that, even though some lives are lost along the way. Which is just what a hero in an RPG is supposed to do, right?

For me, these events, which saw us saving only a single displaced regiment and their families, were far more impactful because they were seen from the perspective of ‘just some guy.’ As Fern puts it, “There are those who change the world, but there are many more who don't have the strength or the opportunity to do so.”

The developers behind Final Fantasy XIV *know* it's an effective framing – that's why In From The Cold as a quest exists. But Final Fantasy's delightful power fantasies rarely permit that kind of indulgence for long.

“The part [of the event] that stuck with me the most,” Fern says, “was when boots first touched snow at the start of the campaign, and every character present stood and took in the scale of the destruction. I didn't have to describe anything – the strength of MMORPGs as a visual medium is that what you're looking at is what you see, and the simple sight of the capital in ruins left our characters speechless.”

“I think roleplay at its core is just that,” adds Sven, “appreciating the world and deepening it. We fill in the gaps, explore the parts of the cultures that are mentioned (but not really focussed on) and make our own stories and characters around that. I would still really love [Final Fantasy XIV] without roleplay, but being a roleplayer makes me really internalise the story so I can build on it.”

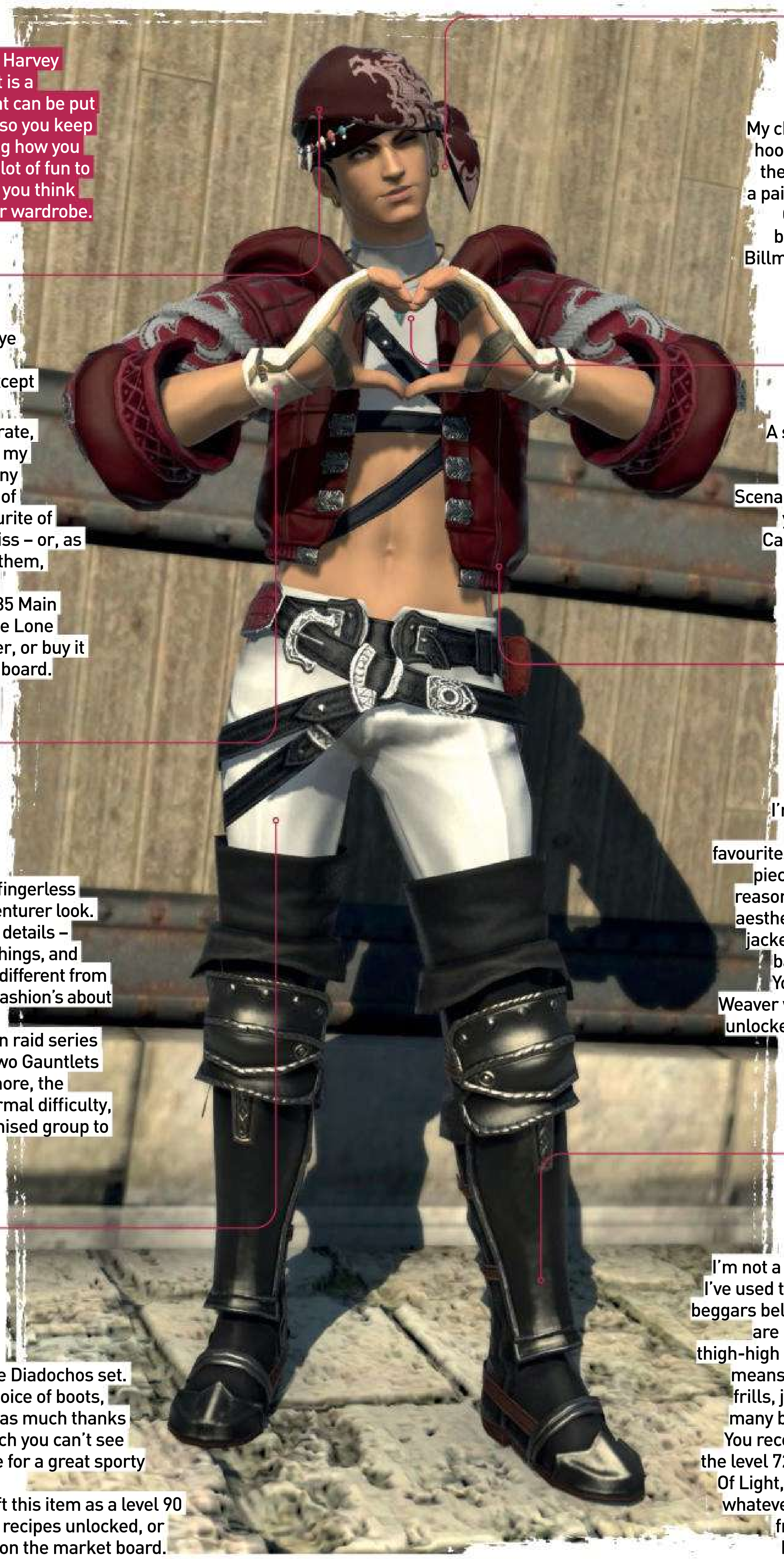
Final Fantasy XIV has a lot of great moments – and some shockingly textured worldbuilding for an MMORPG. But if you ever find yourself saying ‘Man, I wish they'd explored that some more’ about a particular aspect, then you can. Thanks to the community at large that's something you have the power to take on yourself alongside like-minded individuals. The world is already there – so play in it.

GET THE LOOK

Thought Ultimate Raids were tough? Welcome to the real endgame

Looking good

Form or function? Why not both? Harvey Randall's Scarlet Scallywag outfit is a Glamour plate, one of several that can be put together to apply to armour sets so you keep your high-level stats while looking how you want. With 'fits aplenty, there's a lot of fun to be had in tracking down the gear you think looks best and stuffing it into your wardrobe.



HEAD

Linen Bandana

Dye General-purpose Dark Red Dye
Level 35
Jobs/classes All tanks, all DPS except for magical DPS

My Warrior Of Light is a former pirate, so the Linen Bandana has been in my inventory for years. A classic for any scallywag from the thalassocracy of Limsa Lominsa, this item's a favourite of The Dutiful Sisters Of The Edelweiss – or, as any pirate worth their salt knows them, the Rogues' Guild.

You can get this from the level 35 Main Scenario Quest Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie, craft it as a level 34 Weaver, or buy it from other players on the market board.

HANDS

Edengate Halfgloves Of Scouting

Dye None **Level** 80
Jobs/classes Rogue, Ninja, Viper

I love these things. Simple, stylish fingerless gloves to give you that rugged adventurer look. I'm a big fan of the little straps and details – unfortunately you can't dye these things, and their shade of white is just a touch different from the rest of the ensemble, but hey: fashion's about expression, not perfection.

You can get these from the Eden raid series in Shadowbringers by trading in two Gauntlets Of Early Antiquity to NPCs in Eulmore, the Crystarium, and Amh Araeng. Normal difficulty, so you don't need to have an organised group to grab these gloves.

LEGS

Diadochos Bottoms Of Scouting

Dye None **Level** 90
Jobs/classes Rogue, Ninja, Viper

I've already sung my praises of the Diadochos set. While these pair nicely with my choice of boots, I enjoy the uncovered version just as much thanks to their asymmetrical design (which you can't see here, sadly). Still, these legs make for a great sporty look when weaponised wisely.

Just like the chest, you can craft this item as a level 90 Weaver with the Master Weaver X recipes unlocked, or simply buy it from another player on the market board.

JEWELLERY

Auroral Earring

Dye None **Level** 50
Jobs/classes All

My character used to be a pirate. Gold hoop earrings are pirate earrings, so these are a no-brainer. You can grab a pair from the level 50 Main Scenario Quest Through the Maelstrom, or buy it for 20 allied seals from Hunt Billmasters in Ul'dah, Limsa Lominsa, and Old Gridania.

Wayfarer's Necklace

Dye None **Level** 1
Jobs/classes All

A simple crystal necklace that goes with just about anything. You can earn this from the level 90 Main Scenario Quest Newfound Adventure. If you deleted it, you can buy it from Calamity Salvagers in Ul'dah, Limsa Lominsa, and Old Gridania.

TORSO

Diadochos Jacket Of Scouting

Dye Wine Red Dye **Level** 90
Jobs/classes Rogue, Ninja, Viper

I'm a sucker for a good midriff. The Diadochos items are some of my favourites from Endwalker, and two major pieces feature in this Glam – for good reason. They blend modern and fantasy aesthetics in a fun and flirty way. Coats, jackets, and cosy sweaters are a great baseline for a fetching casual look.

You can craft this item as a level 90 Weaver with the Master Weaver X recipes unlocked, or buy it from other players on the market board.

FEET

Crystarium Greaves

Dye None **Level** 1
Jobs/classes: All

I'm not a fan of the full Crystarium Set, but I've used these greaves in so many Glams it beggars belief. Class-agnostic bits of armour are hard to come by – and the simple, thigh-high design of the Crystarium Greaves means they fit with all sorts of looks. No frills, just simple plated armour and too many belt straps: a Final Fantasy staple.

You receive the Crystarium Greaves from the level 72 Main Scenario Quest The Oracle Of Light, though if you've deleted them for whatever reason, you can purchase them from Calamity Salvagers in Ul'dah, Limsa Lominsa, and Old Gridania.

Fashion on a budget

Getting glamorous without gushing gil

While the fashion game in Final Fantasy XIV can get pricey, it's actually not that expensive to snag some starter looks. There are tons of areas where you can grab some free, great-looking gear. Let us lead you to our favourite locations…

Dungeons

If you're running roulettes, you might feel inclined to pass on loot you don't need in order to keep your Armoury Chest tidy, but doing that means passing on free garments. Go into your Options menu, navigate to Character Configuration, then uncheck Store All Newly Obtained Items In The Armoury Chest." This'll dump new gear in your inventory, letting you yea or nay it without fumbling through gear tabs.

The Gold Saucer

There are some great Glamour items to grab here, and they all cost MGP – fake money that's definitely not part of some complex Ul'dahn money-laundering scheme. Do your Cactpot, play minigames, and you'll be able to snag some cute kit in no time.

PvP

Endwalker's PvP revamp introduced seasonal rewards, which often include a set of gear that's usable on every class and job. There's also the Crystal Trophy and Wolf Mark vendors, which are stocked with plenty of items to fill out those 800 dresser slots.

Divine inspiration

Sourcing ideas for your next 'fit

This game has items. A lot of them. As such, it can be tough to piece things together to make the perfect look, though fortunately there are plenty of places to shop around.

The major hub is the Eorzea Collection (ffxiv.eorzeacollection.com). This site lets you browse looks filtered by class, race, and even level. You can use it for inspiration, find out where to track down a specific piece of gear you've been unable to find, or just lift looks wholesale. If you've made a Glamour you're proud of, you can even upload your own. You can also browse the FFXIVGlamours subreddit, though plenty of users there still use Eorzea Collection to share which pieces they picked.

Then there's the community-made Gposers Magazine (gposers.carrd.co) which has monthly free issues filled with spotlighted Glams, as well as a community Discord where players gleefully share their swag – plus advice on how to take pictures.

Fashion report

Do your little turn on the coeurl-walk

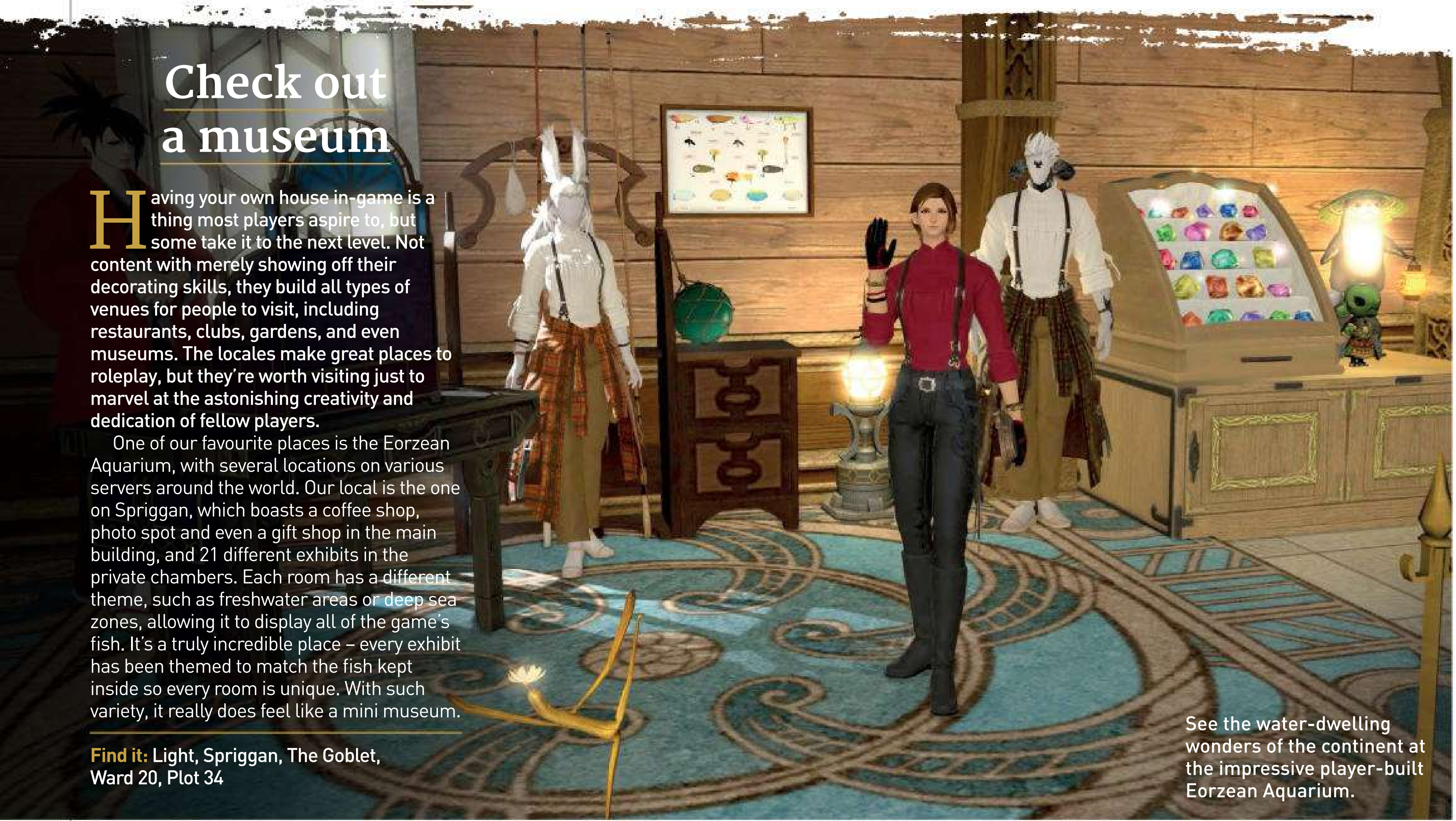
We can't talk about fashion without mentioning the fashion report. This weekly from the Gold Saucer is more like a scavenger hunt than a style show, though doing it does unlock an NPC vendor who can sell you a set of clothes, dyes, and furniture for your apartment.

Each week, Masked Rose will ask you to whip up an outfit based on a set of hints. You can make four attempts before the week's over, and you'll get a score based on how close you came to the briefing. You can try to suss this out yourself, though there are plenty of communities which will tell you what items to wear, including the Final Fantasy XIV subreddit itself (r/ffxiv).

Achieve the right look and you'll get a bounty of MGP, which you can also spend on items around the Gold Saucer. You may even stumble upon some items you hadn't considered using in the process of hunting the right ones down – inspiration often comes from unexpected places!

ADDED EXTRAS

There's more to **FFXIV** than dungeons, emotional storytelling, and epic battles. Here are ways to play without lifting your blade



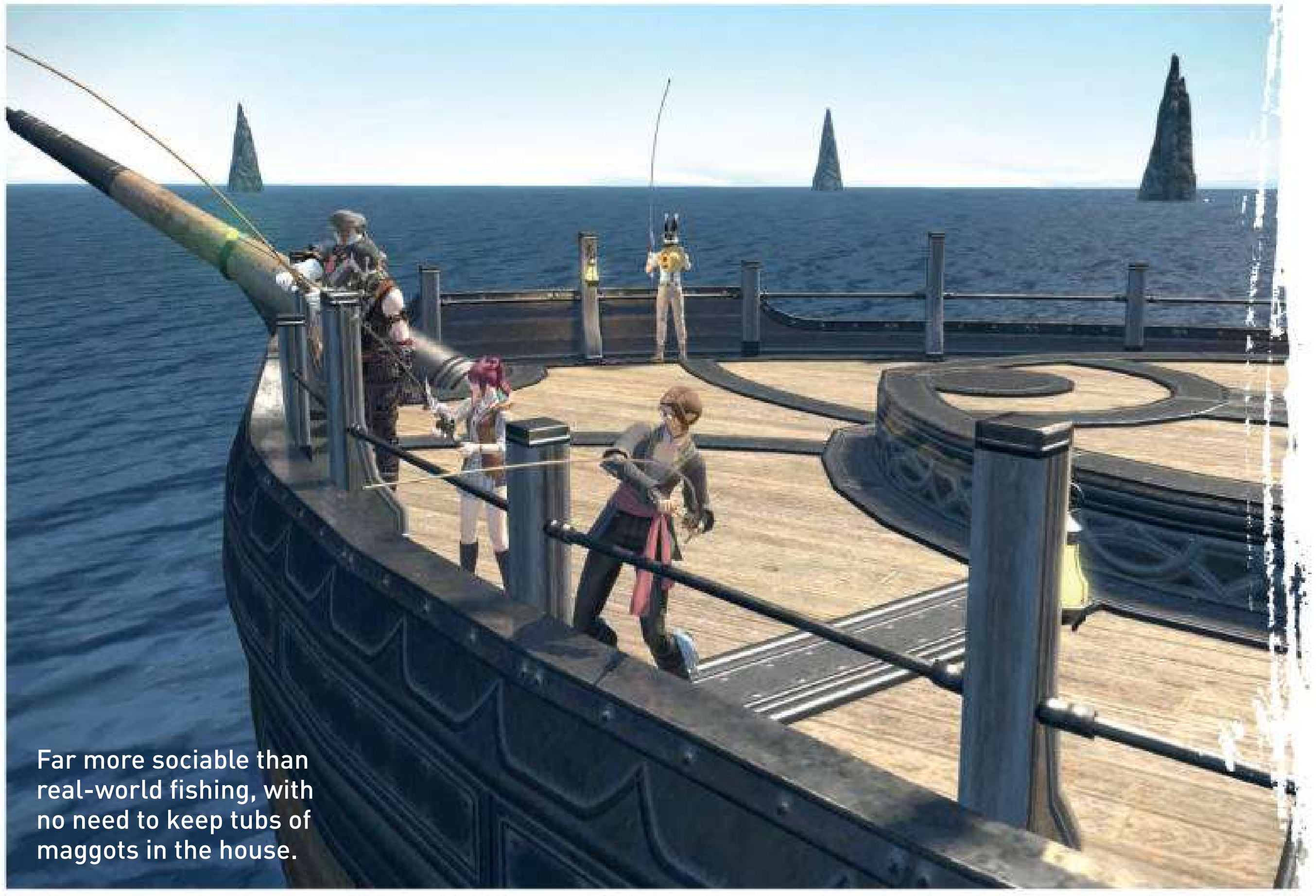
Check out a museum

Having your own house in-game is a thing most players aspire to, but some take it to the next level. Not content with merely showing off their decorating skills, they build all types of venues for people to visit, including restaurants, clubs, gardens, and even museums. The locales make great places to roleplay, but they're worth visiting just to marvel at the astonishing creativity and dedication of fellow players.

One of our favourite places is the Eorzean Aquarium, with several locations on various servers around the world. Our local is the one on Spriggan, which boasts a coffee shop, photo spot and even a gift shop in the main building, and 21 different exhibits in the private chambers. Each room has a different theme, such as freshwater areas or deep sea zones, allowing it to display all of the game's fish. It's a truly incredible place – every exhibit has been themed to match the fish kept inside so every room is unique. With such variety, it really does feel like a mini museum.

Find it: Light, Spriggan, The Goblet, Ward 20, Plot 34

See the water-dwelling wonders of the continent at the impressive player-built Eorzean Aquarium.



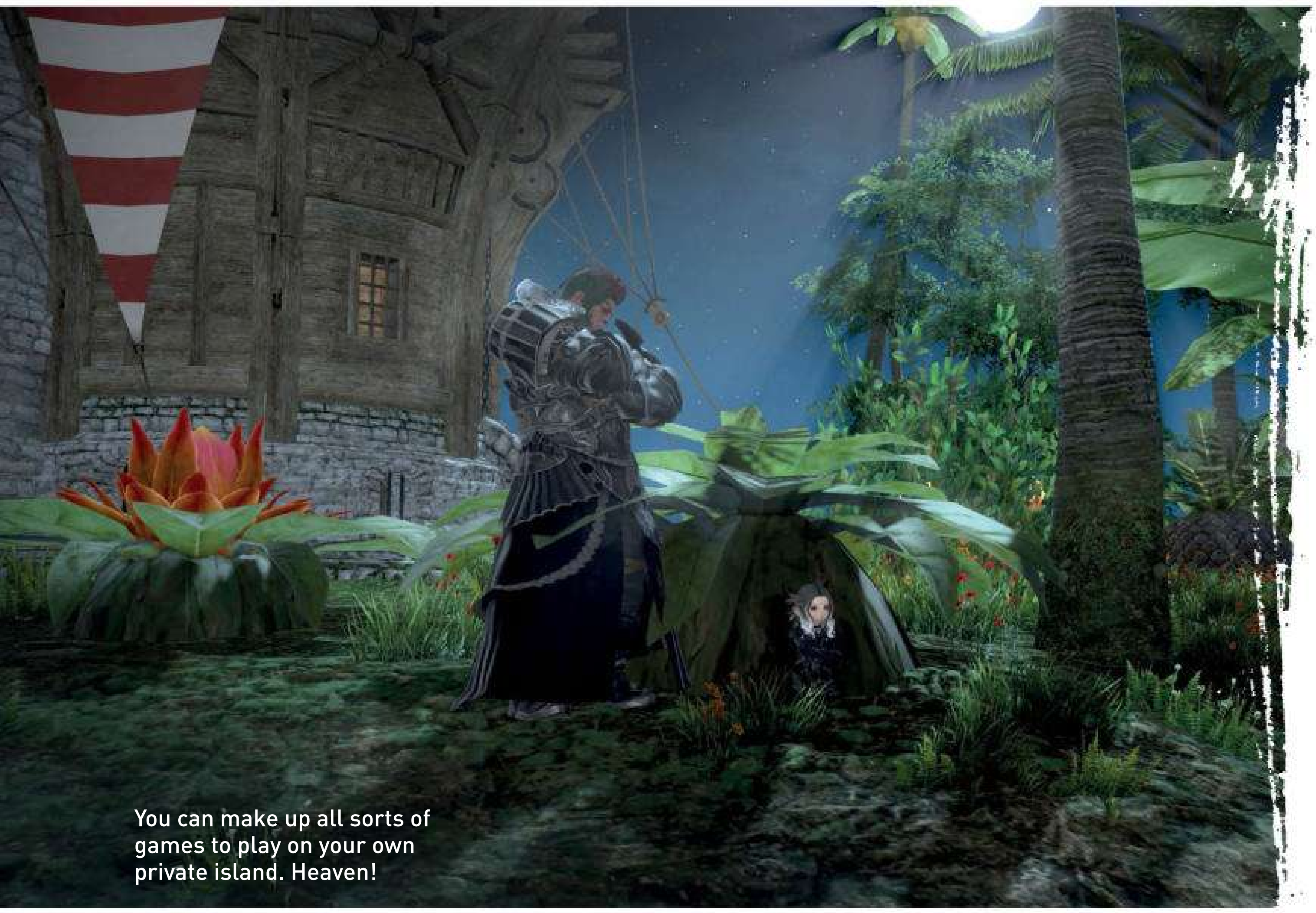
Far more sociable than real-world fishing, with no need to keep tubs of maggots in the house.

Go fishing

Need a break but don't fancy fighting? Taking up crafting or gathering is one way to kick back, but it can be quite the endeavour once you realise that each Job also has 90 levels and its own systems. If you're looking for something more casual, give Ocean Fishing a try. You'll need to unlock the Fisher class first, but you won't need to worry about following any of the traditional quests or completing the huge fishing log – simply head over to the docks in Limsa and catch an expedition ship.

Ocean Fishing is a super-laid-back version of fishing that you can join in groups, but you'll have to wait (yes, properly wait) to catch a boat as they only run every two hours in-game. Once you're aboard, simply cast your line and wait for the fish to come to you. It makes for a much more relaxed way to enjoy gathering, without the stress of needing to search for fishing holes and millions of different types of bait. It's even better if you get a group of friends together and make a night of it.

Find it: Limsa Lominsa, Lower Decks, Ferry Docks



You can make up all sorts of games to play on your own private island. Heaven!

Find sanctuary

Really need to get away from all the questing and fighting? Then why not hop on a boat to your very own private island? As a reward for all your hard work saving the world in Endwalker, you now have access to a small piece of paradise that you can shape to your own liking. You'll need to explore and gather materials first, but you'll be able to customise it by placing buildings, decorating, and letting your minions loose. You can farm, catch monsters, and even earn a new type of currency to spend on exclusive mounts and outfits, but the best part of island life is being able to invite your friends.

They might not be able to craft on your island like you can, but you can basically treat the place like your own private playground and hangout spot. Our favourite pastime is to use it to play hide and seek – one person counts on the beach and hides their UI while everyone else scatters and finds a place to hide, be that behind a stack of boxes or clipping into a plant. Then sit back and stifle your giggles over voice chat as the seeker walks straight past you on their hunt. It's a small but inventive way to make the game your own.

Find it: Lower La Noscea, Morabay Dry Docks – speak to Baldin the ferryman

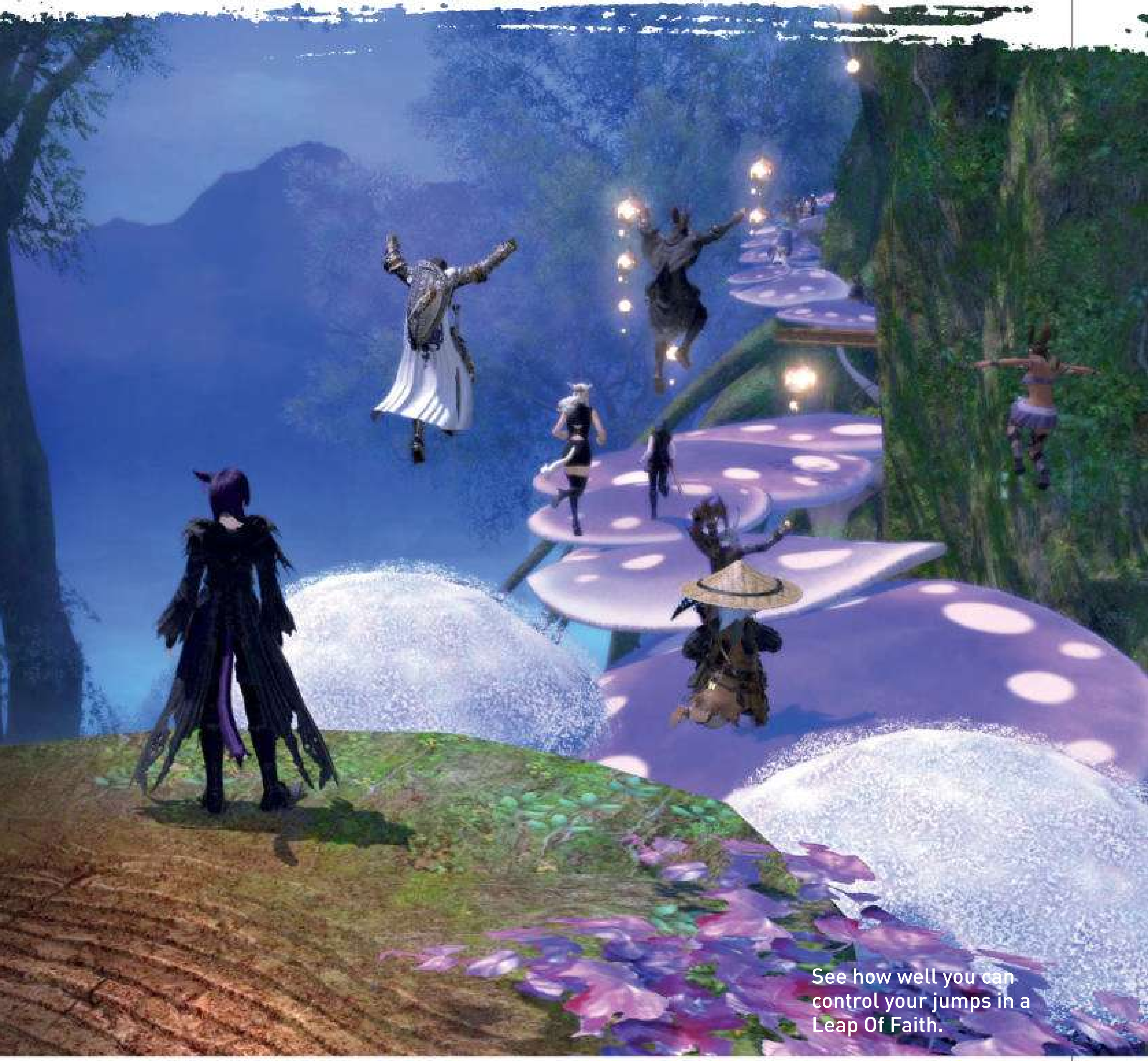
Put your skills to the test

While raiding is one way to put yourself to the test, there are plenty of other challenges dotted around Hydaelyn. You could head over to the Gold Saucer to try your hand at chocobo racing, mahjong, fair-like games or even a few rounds of Triple Triad, but the most punishing challenges are the Leap Of Faith ones.

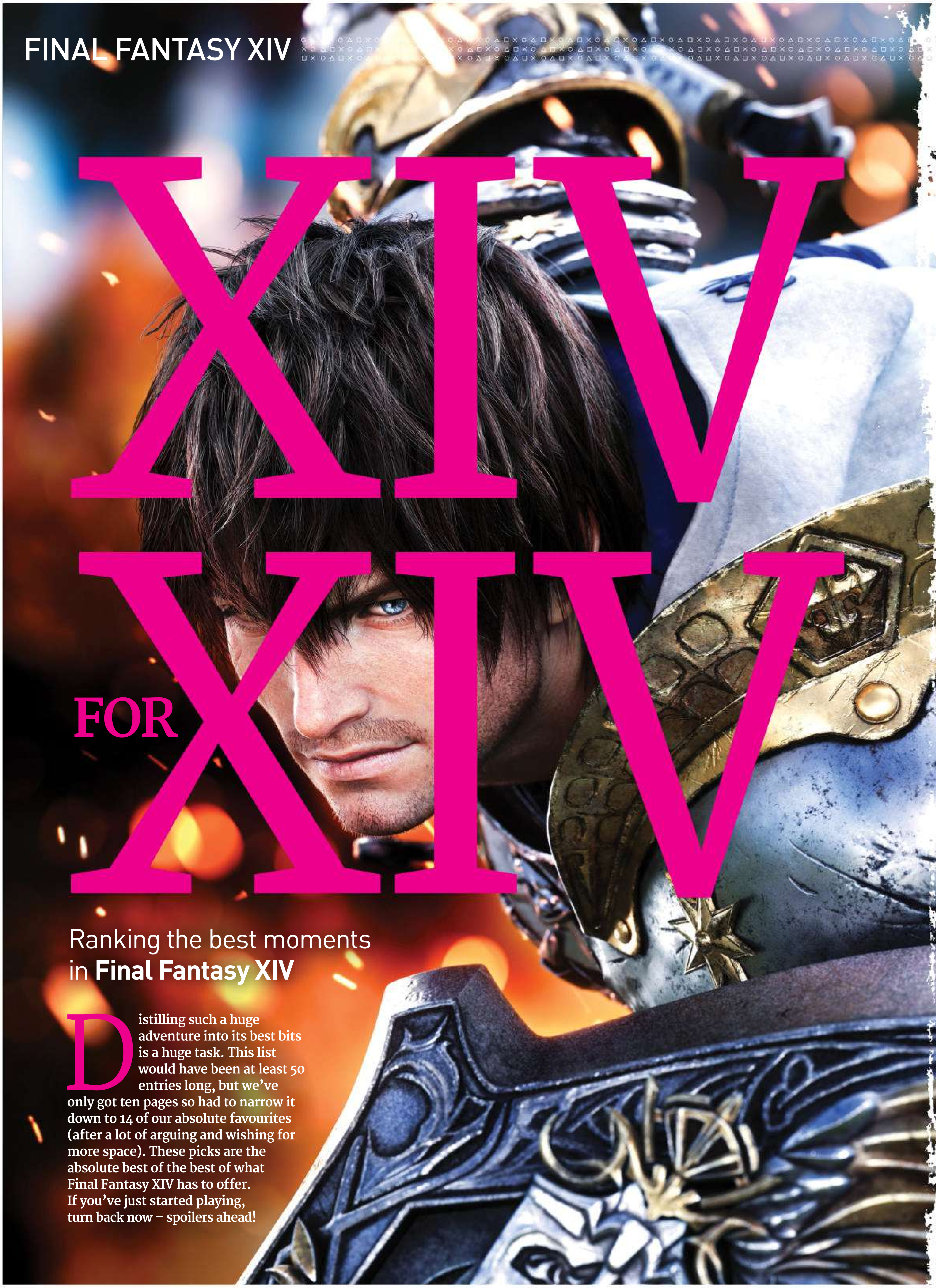
Essentially they're platforming events in which you leap from small platforms or balance on narrow beams to reach point trophies and (eventually) the end goal. There are several stages that run in rotation, giving you plenty of variety, and each will have you pulling your hair out in frustration but also hollering with joy when you complete it.

The punishment doesn't stop there, though: you can also find jumping puzzle challenges out in the game world, usually on the side of an impossibly tall building. There are several dotted around, but the most famous is the tower in Kugane, which has a particularly challenging route and ends in a freefall to – hopefully – land on a lamppost for a collectible sightseeing spot. It'll certainly test your nerves.

Find it: Shiokaze Hostelry – Kugane, Beach Lighthouse – Shirogane, Chakra Falls – Rhalgar's Reach, Outer Towers – The Firmament, Paksa's Path – Radz-At-Han



See how well you can control your jumps in a Leap Of Faith.



XIV FOR XIV

Ranking the best moments in **Final Fantasy XIV**

Distilling such a huge adventure into its best bits is a huge task. This list would have been at least 50 entries long, but we've only got ten pages so had to narrow it down to 14 of our absolute favourites (after a lot of arguing and wishing for more space). These picks are the absolute best of the best of what Final Fantasy XIV has to offer. If you've just started playing, turn back now – spoilers ahead!

XIV

Meeting Ifrit

Fire in the hole

After spending a fair chunk of the start of the game getting to grips with everything and doing typical adventurer things like seeing off angry wildlife and getting a few dungeons under your belt, the game finally hits you with your first proper 'Oh [blorp!]' moment.

After an attempt to stop some crystal thieves ends in betrayal you find yourself on your knees as a god appears before you. The fire Primal Ifrit bursts forth from a ball of flame and crashes, before enslaving your comrades and turning them into his disciples. However, his flames don't affect you and now you have your first proper big fight on your hands. As the music swells, you pick up your weapon and are forced to face the biggest threat you've ever known. A truly epic early battle.

XIII

Playing Dark Knight

The Job worth doing for the quests

The big stories in FFXIV aren't the only ones worth playing; the side-quests are too. In particular, the Dark Knight quests are worth doing even if you're not a fan of tanking.

It's a class that calls for giant swords and knowing how to take a hit. You need to channel your inner darkness and rage to make the most of your strikes. Luckily you have a teacher to show you the way – Fray. She shows you how to commune with the darkness inside yourself as you find yourself becoming frustrated by people relying on you and your blade thirsts for blood. But as you finally confront it you realise it is Fray and she was dead all along – she manifested as a teacher for you and now resides within you. And that's just the early quests; it keeps getting better from there.

XII

Trapped in a soldier's body

Becoming no-one

By the time you play Endwalker the Warrior Of Light is well established as a capable and dependable hero, so when you get whisked away to a rather sinister dinner party with villains Zenos and Fandaniel and find your mind has been transferred into the body of a nameless soldier it's a real shock to the system.

As Zenos steals your body and heads off to find your friends, you're left without any of your strength or talents and forced to fight your way forward in a normal person's body to save them. It's a powerful moment as you realise just how vulnerable you are without any of the power you've accumulated; the desperation feels very real as you crawl through the snow, pushing yourself forward with willpower alone.

XI

Yotsuyu's story arc

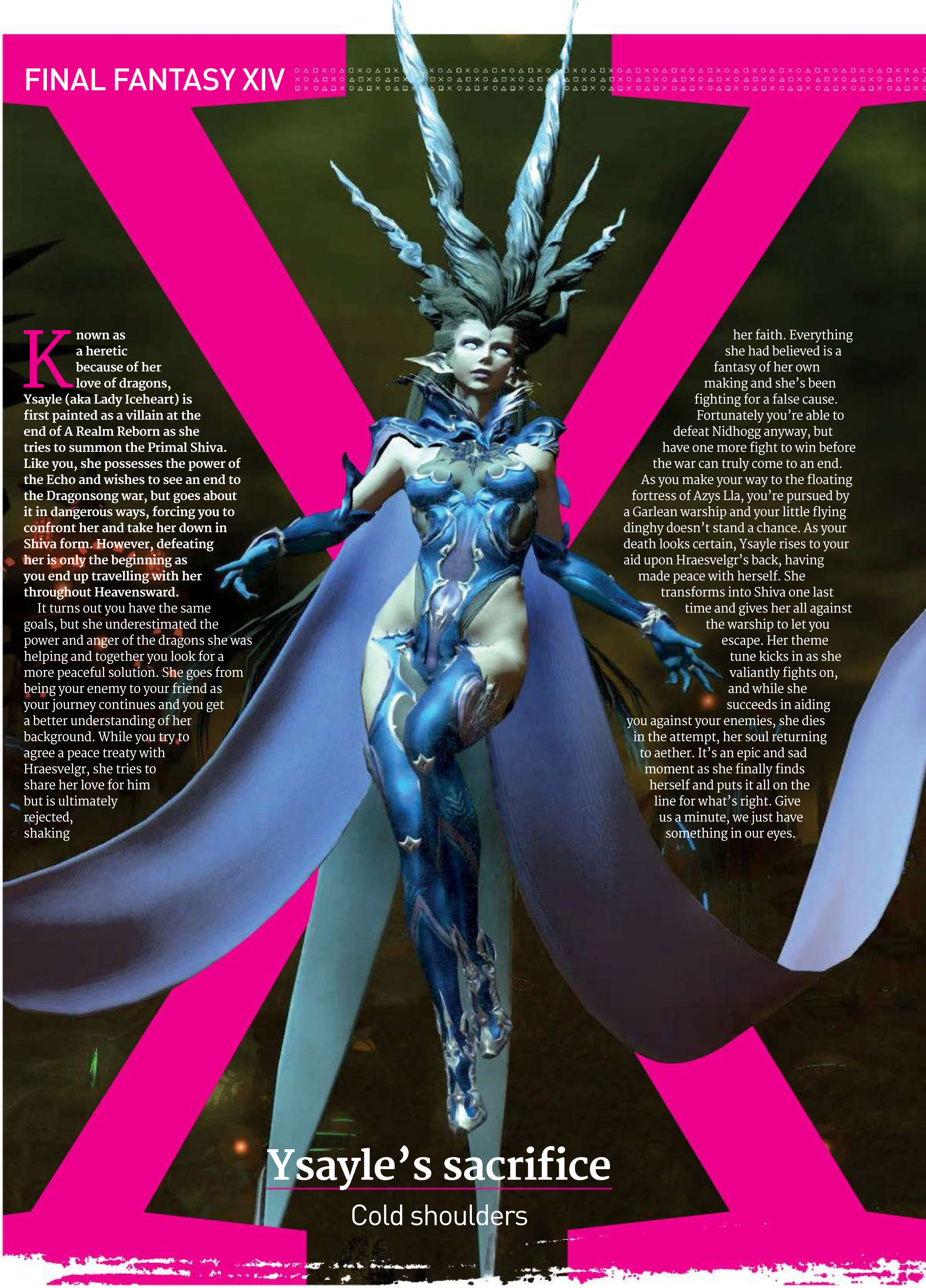
A fall from grace

One of Stormblood's most complex characters, Yotsuyu, the viceroy of Doma, has committed multiple atrocities against her former countrymen. She's a cruel leader, but it's hard to blame her for her rage at her fellow Domans after you find out how she was abused and sold off to a brothel.

Things take a turn when Doma castle falls, though, as she loses her memories and returns to a childlike state – can she be prosecuted her for her actions like this? Unfortunately she is manipulated once more and through sheer rage she becomes the Primal Tsukuyomi, a god as beautiful as she is angry. Her past torments her during the fight, spurring on her strength until you eventually lay her low. It feels like a sad end rather than a satisfying one.

Ysayle’s sacrifice

Cold shoulders



Known as a heretic because of her love of dragons, Ysayle (aka Lady Iceheart) is first painted as a villain at the end of A Realm Reborn as she tries to summon the Primal Shiva. Like you, she possesses the power of the Echo and wishes to see an end to the Dragonsong war, but goes about it in dangerous ways, forcing you to confront her and take her down in Shiva form. However, defeating her is only the beginning as you end up travelling with her throughout Heavensward.

It turns out you have the same goals, but she underestimated the power and anger of the dragons she was helping and together you look for a more peaceful solution. She goes from being your enemy to your friend as your journey continues and you get a better understanding of her background. While you try to agree a peace treaty with Hraesvelgr, she tries to share her love for him but is ultimately rejected, shaking her faith. Everything she had believed is a fantasy of her own making and she’s been fighting for a false cause. Fortunately you’re able to defeat Nidhogg anyway, but have one more fight to win before the war can truly come to an end.

As you make your way to the floating fortress of Azys Lla, you’re pursued by a Garlean warship and your little flying dinghy doesn’t stand a chance. As your death looks certain, Ysayle rises to your aid upon Hraesvelgr’s back, having made peace with herself. She transforms into Shiva one last time and gives her all against the warship to let you escape. Her theme tune kicks in as she valiantly fights on, and while she succeeds in aiding you against your enemies, she dies in the attempt, her soul returning to aether. It’s an epic and sad moment as she finally finds herself and puts it all on the line for what’s right. Give us a minute, we just have something in our eyes.

IX

The gentleman detective

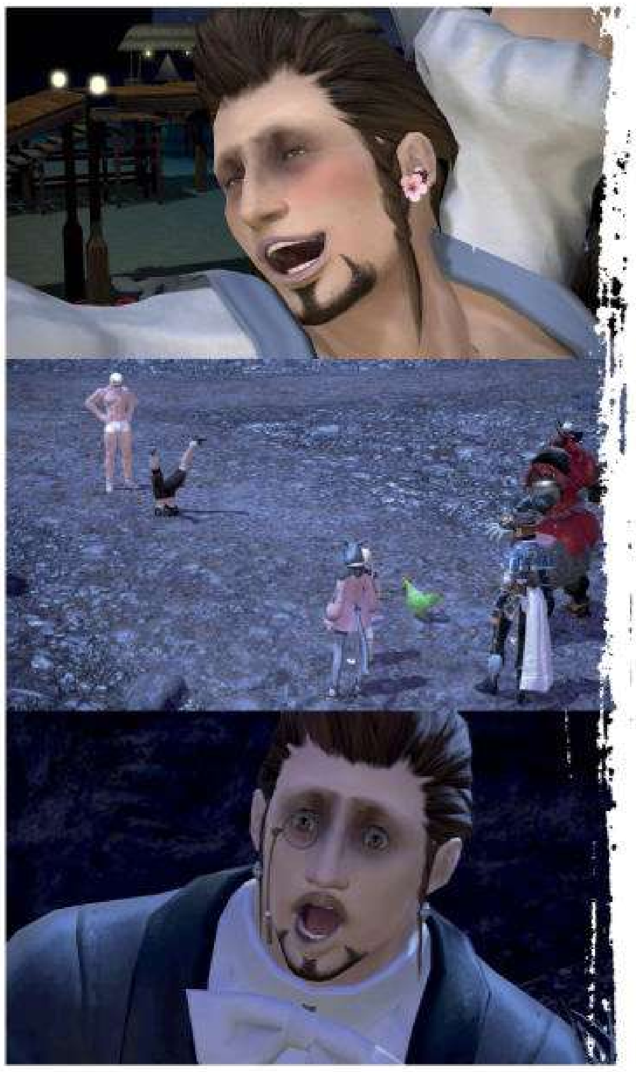
FFXIV's very own comic relief

Saving various countries multiple times and losing your friends can become quite hard on your nerves, but Hildibrand Manderville the gentleman detective is here to lighten the mood and maybe solve a mystery or two in the process. He features in a series of side-quests that sees him travel the length and breadth of the realm, blundering his way through solving weapon heists, zombification, jewel thefts, and alien sightings.

Everything about Hildibrand is absurd, but along with his faithful companion Nashu, his doting (but equally bizarre) parents, and his friend/rival Greg (aka Gilgamesh), he manages to get the biggest laughs out of us – just what you need between serious missions.

Each mystery starts when you find Hildibrand stuck upside-down somewhere, legs comically akimbo. Once you pull him out of whatever he's trapped in, he sets about solving a mystery. He may not be the brightest bulb in the chandelier, but he's strangely durable, able to take a serious pounding and – he even manages to survive being thrown into space. The quests involve a lot of slapstick moments involving things like frying pans and explosives, and the devs have pushed the facial animations to the extreme to add to the absurdity of it all.

We can't pick out a definitive best Hildibrand moment – every second that you spend with him is sheer joy. We can't wait to see what he gets up to in Dawntrail.



If you think the Warrior Of Light's life is bizarre, check out Hildibrand's bananas escapades.

Personal picks

The moments that got away

Emet-Selch's last words

In Endwalker you finally get to meet Emet-Selch as he was in the past, before his fall into villainy and dark depression. Seeing him and knowing what he becomes make his final words to you even more poignant: "Do not squander it. The Legacy I leave you." We won't, we promise!

Daniella Lucas

Personal picks

The moments that got away

Best beastmen? The Namazu, fins down

Having spent some time fangirling over powerful villainesses among my own Free Company, there's much to be said for experiencing this story alongside friends. Betrayal at the scheming fins of Namazu Gyodo in Stormblood sticks in the mind, as myself and a fellow Warrior Of Light witnessing this cutscene at the same time voiced the same thought in unison: "KICK HIM." What happens next is like Lyse read our minds.

Jess Kinghorn

With an attitude like he's got, it's no wonder Zenos hasn't got any mates.

VIII

The final fight with Zenos

Best frenemies

At the end of Endwalker when you've defeated the despair that was fuelling the apocalypse and your body is battered, Zenos issues you with one last challenge. So desperate is he for your companionship and attention that he travels to the end of the universe to find you. You're the only person who can give him what he wants: a fight that makes him feel alive. He's hounded you for three expansions and now, finally, he can have his moment.

It's a strange feeling going up against him. The finality of it all really hits you as it's just the two of you going head-to-head - no-one else is there to complicate matters or whisk you away to more important things. You have to push through your exhaustion to face him.

It's an intense fight as he goes about testing your reflexes with his scythe. You keep exchanging blows until you finally both collapse from exhaustion. Mustering up the strength for one last punch in a showdown, he eventually goes down and so do you. You can't help but feel sorry for him as he lays there dying, happy to be with you, his 'friend'. All that death and destruction just so to make a twisted connection. As you succumb to darkness and your own death, your friends call out to you and manage to pull you back from the brink. You're surrounded by everyone who loves you, while he's alone in the cold emptiness of space. A tragic but fitting end.

VII

Shielded by Haurchefant

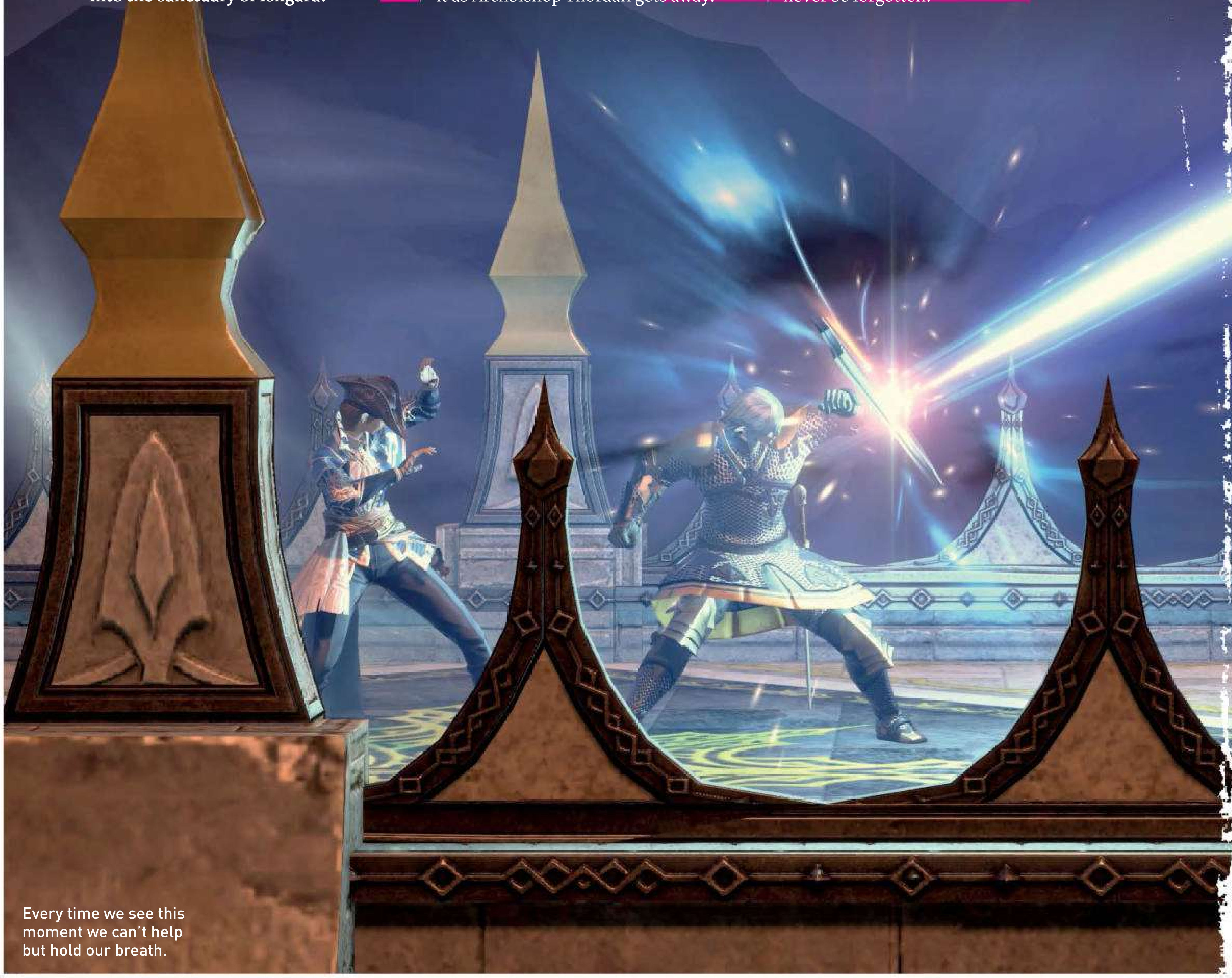
A smile better suits a hero

We can't think about this entry without crying. It's a death that happens relatively early on in the full history of FFXIV, but its impact has stayed with players ever since. A valiant and warm man, Haurchefant's really taken by the Warrior Of Light and does everything in his power to help you. When all of Eorzea suspects you and the Scions of murdering Queen Nanamo, he's the one who believes in your innocence wholeheartedly and takes you in. He's the man who ultimately gets you across the border into the sanctuary of Ishgard.

Despite being an illegitimate child who was treated poorly in his youth, his selfless deeds earned him a knighthood and the same respect as his trueborn brothers. He aids you in every endeavour he can, even when you're seen with Lady Iceheart – a supposed enemy of Ishgard. He ignores his father's pleas to not fight the Heaven's Ward and rescue Ser Aymeric alongside you, doing it anyway because you're his friend.

Finally, when you're in danger and a spear of light is thrown straight at you he steps in its path to block it. His shield fails in the attempt and he is impaled by it as Archbishop Thordan gets away. Despite your best efforts he can't be healed and dies in your arms. With his last breath he tells you to smile as a smile better suits a hero. Aaaand now we're bawling again.

The game has seen many deaths since, but few have hit as hard as Haurchefant's passing. He was such a well-written character with a loving disposition that his loss and the way the game really draws out the horror and nobility of it all makes it hit home hard. His spirit lives on, though, sometimes appearing to keep urging you forward when things look really bleak. He'll never be forgotten.



Every time we see this moment we can't help but hold our breath.

VI

Fighting Elidibus

Striking imagery makes an amazing throwback

After defeating Emet-Selch at the end of Shadowbringers and learning what befell the Ancients, you have just one unsundered Ascian left to face – Elidibus.

He's the only one left to rejoin the star, and you are responsible for taking all of his friends away from him. Unsurprisingly, then, he wants you dead, and turns himself into the original Warrior Of Light in order to bring that about. It's a beautiful throwback to the very first Final Fantasy as he looks just like Amano's art for that game. Fighting a false hero and seeing the brief reappearance of an old friend makes this one of our favourite fights in the game.

V

Meeting Hydaelyn

Mother has been looking after us all this time

Endwalker brings the decade-long saga of Zodiark and Hydaelyn to a close, and after all these years of being gently guided by her and granted the power of the Echo, we finally get to meet Hydaelyn herself.

The meeting has been a long time coming, so to find her as Venat the Ancient in Elpis and then realise what she went through to become the Mother Crystal and Hydaelyn in her efforts to give you a chance to save the star is heartbreaking. She gives you one last push by making sure you're strong enough to face Meteion, and as she finally dies she grants you the last of her magic to ensure you have enough power. Her children have all grown up.

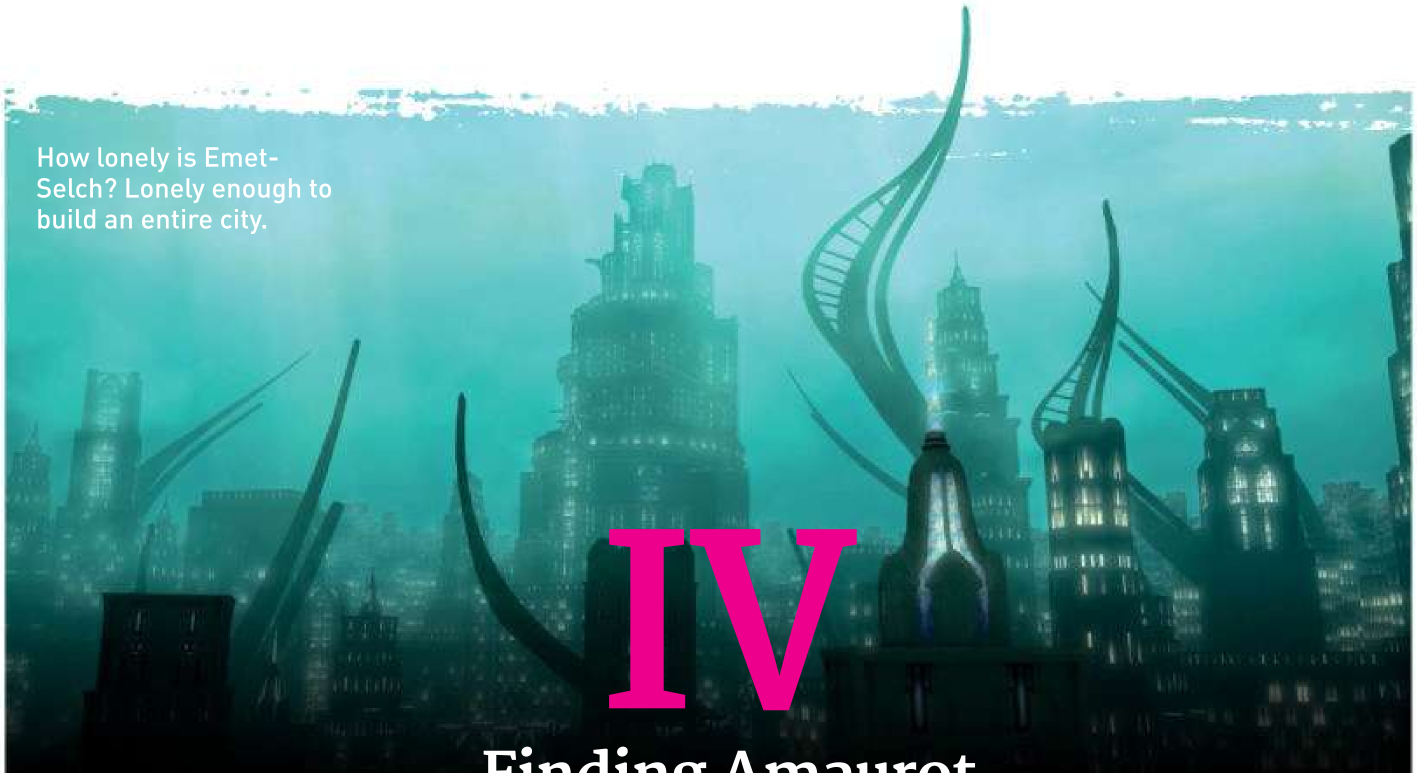
Personal picks

The moments that got away

The getaway

There's lots to love about A Realm Reborn's story, but it's the epilogue that really elevates FFXIV's narrative, making it clear you're in for something special from then on. What begins post-credits as a quest to help Alphinaud form the Crystal Braves escalates into some of the best fantasy political scheming we've played, and it's not in our favour. What results is a desperate flight from Ul'dah, a city you've grown comfortable with hanging out in, leading Heavensward to begin with you in exile, separated from your allies.

Oscar Taylor-Kent



How lonely is Emet-Selch? Lonely enough to build an entire city.

IV

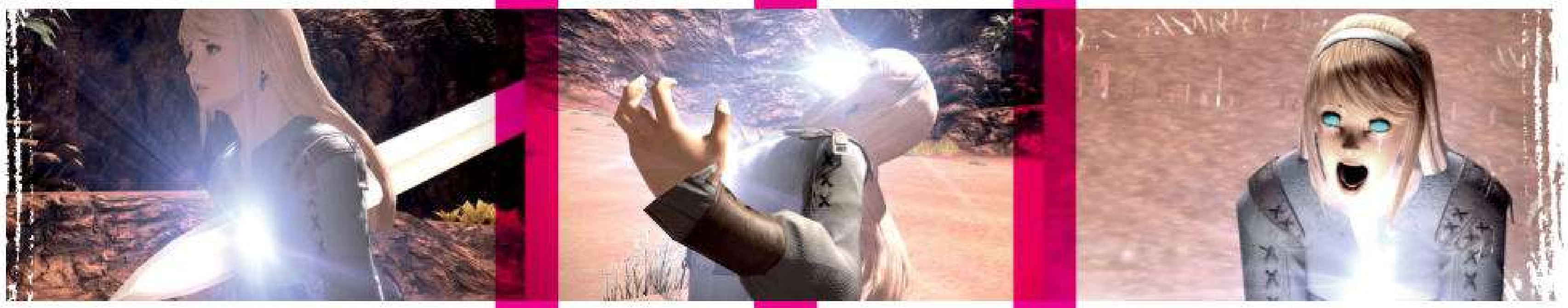
Finding Amaurot

The biggest surprise reveal in the game

Shadowbringers has lots of excellent story moments, but one of our faves is finding Amaurot, the city of the Ancients. During the journey across the First, Emet-Selch has befriended and befuddled you, finally retreating to his hidden lair while taking G'raha Tia hostage and taunting you to find him before you turn into a sin eater yourself. The problem is, the city's at the bottom of the ocean.

With the help of some magic and a big whale making a giant air bubble you're able to explore the depths by walking on the ocean floor – but where could Emet-Selch be hiding? There are so many caves and canyons, plus a few old ruins. Eventually you wind your way through a cave system, slowly moving deeper in, until you turn a corner and find it. Amaurot. The devs are smart, though; first you see the shocked faces of the Scions before the scene pans around and you take in the city. It's a mark of the true scale of Emet-Selch's sadness – you expected a hideaway, but he's created an illusion of an entire populated city to remember his brethren by. It's an amazing demonstration of why he is so desperate and the grandeur of what he has lost. You finally understand his motivations.

III



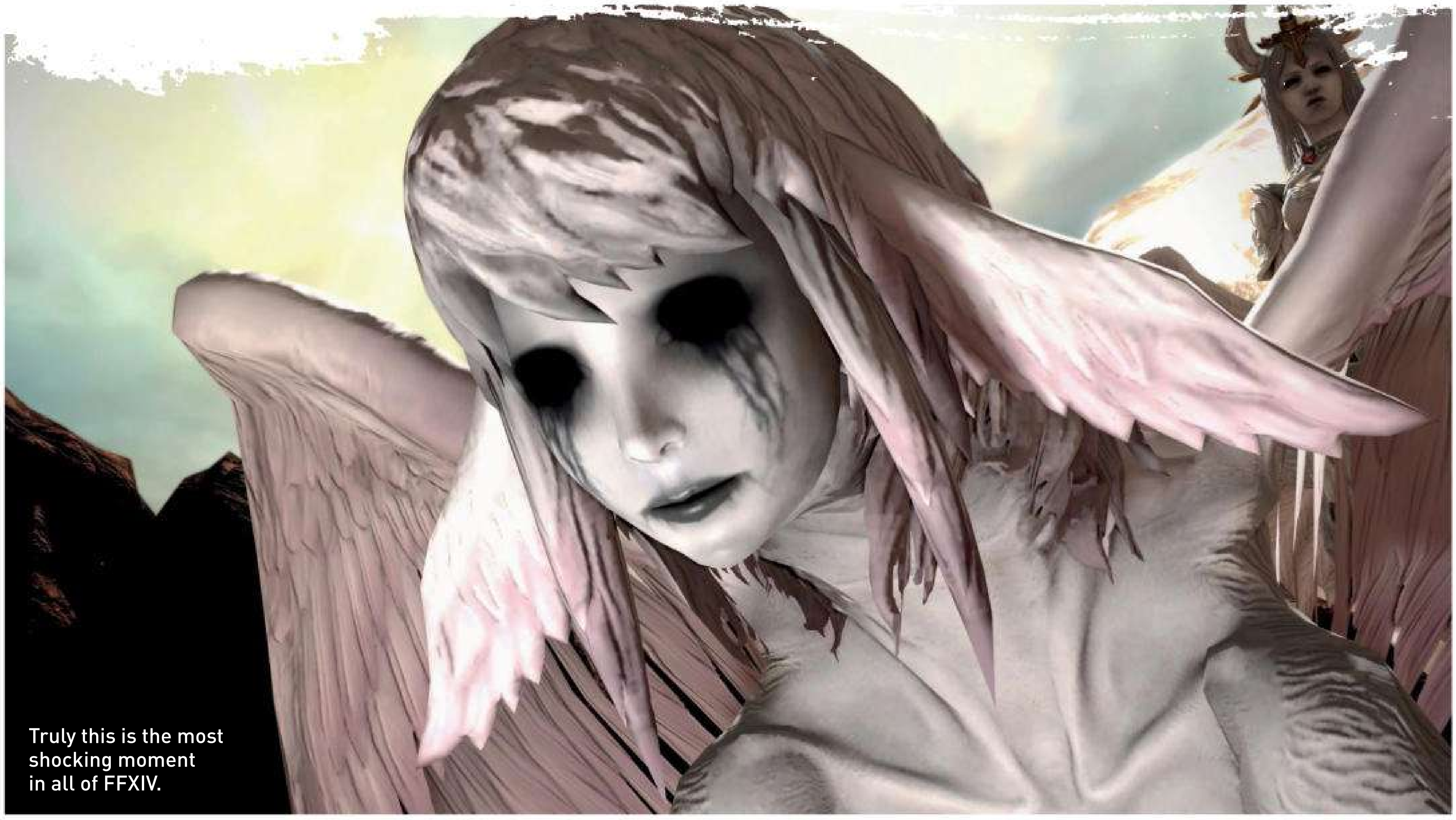
Witnessing a sin eater transformation

Not content with drama and comedy, FFXIV does horror too

We're into the top three now with a moment that had us mouths agape. Early on in Shadowbringers you encounter sin eaters – once-normal beings that have become warped by an excess of light aether and turned into something akin to a horrendous biblical angel. They may be white and usually sport wings, but their faces are cold and stony and expressionless. They live only to hunt and consume the aether of the remaining populace.

Because of the excess light here, people can become corrupted by it and slowly turn into sin eaters. Tesleen is a young woman who helps those affected by corruption, letting them live out their final days in peace and giving them poison so they'll pass away peacefully before they fully turn. Unfortunately for her a large, powerful sin eater turns up, and while you're out searching for a lost child the sin eater finds him first. She runs to his aid and takes a blade to her back for her troubles. What transpires next is horrifying.

As the light from the sin eater floods her, it starts to melt her very being from the inside out, before enveloping her in a feathery cocoon and revealing her as a twisted monster. The camera doesn't shy away from showing you the process and the pain it causes her. You see the full detail of her face dripping white as the young boy she saved looks on without emotion, unable to recognise what is going on as he has been robbed of his emotion from the corruption. It drives home just how devastating the threat of light is here on the First.



Truly this is the most shocking moment in all of FFXIV.

II

Traversing Ultima Thule

One last walk to push through

The final area in Endwalker comes as a bit of a surprise. It's a fractured place at the edge of the universe built of the despair of the dying civilisations Meteion found on her journey. It's cold but beautiful, and exceptionally difficult to get around, but that's part of what makes this place so special – the road you have to take through it to reach the end.

The area is made of Dynamis, a force that is created from the power of emotion. Here it has been used to make a cold place filled with pure despair, and in order to progress you have to confront each of the beings that live there, with your companions using their own Dynamis and sacrificing themselves to reach through and bridge each area. As you confront each area's people and challenge their hopelessness the music changes. It starts as a quiet, distant twinkle, but more instruments are added in turn, encouraging you to press forward. Finally, as Alisaie and Alphinaud make the last sacrifice for the final bridge the lyrics kick in. You may be alone, but you can feel the presence of your friends through the music. Their hope is still with you.

FRIENDS TILL THE END

That's not the end, though: you still can't reach Meteion's nest and as she taunts you, you have to reach into yourself and push on, calling two familiar friends from the past to help you one last time. Emet-Selch and Hythlodaeus. Finally fully aware of all that has transpired, Emet-Selch is ready to give you one last push and leave the future of his world to you. As he snaps his fingers a sea of flowers appears, bright white and full of hope. Meteion falls to her knees and is brought to tears, confronted with the fact that hope persists even in the depths of despair. It's a stirring moment that sets the stage for your final confrontation.

> "YOU CAN FEEL THE PRESENCE OF YOUR FRIENDS THROUGH THE MUSIC."

Even when things look their bleakest, hope is still there.

Stepping into the First

Arriving on a new world, ripe for exploration

Finally, we're at our number-one moment in all of Final Fantasy XIV: the moment when you step over the threshold into an entirely new world for the first time. Ultimately it's a small action – it's just one step. But what's so special is what that step represents: the start of something completely fresh and the anticipation of the exciting journey to come.

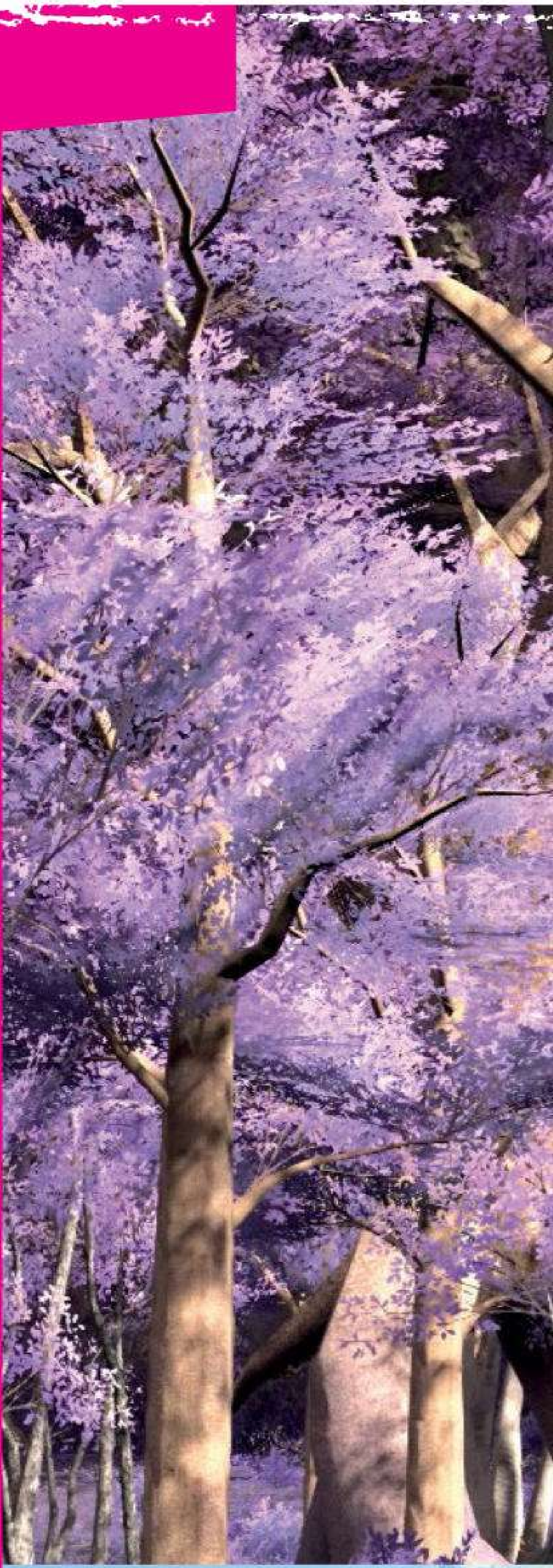
The First is a reflection of the Source – a version of the world you're from – and while it does have some similarities to the places you've seen before, it's also completely alien. The point at which you cross finds you in an area called Lakeland, which is filled with gorgeous pink trees and purple grasses. It's as alien as it is beautiful. As you walk forward you notice the sky – a dull, billowing gold and grey that covers everything in light. Eventually you meet your first person, a man who looks exactly like the man you first met on the chocobo carriage at the very start of A Realm Reborn. It's a great little nod to show this is also the start of a new adventure and that these worlds are connected. He's drinking and advises you to find shelter since it's night time even though the sky is still light. It's a small way to introduce you to this world's problems and the effect light has on its people. The man you met as a green adventurer was friendly and welcoming; this one is a drunkard who sends you away. Despite the light here, this place is much darker at its heart.

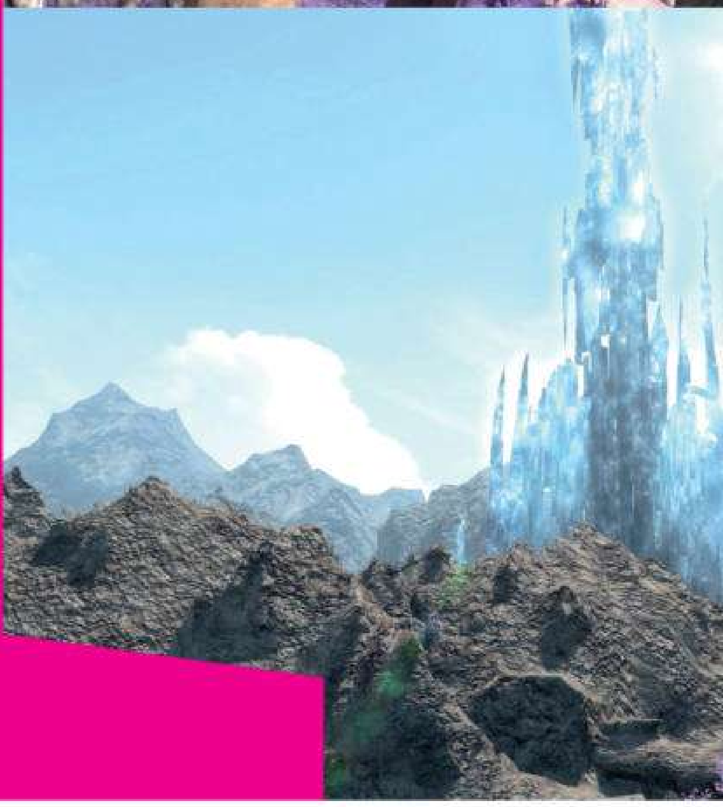
> **"IT'S GOT EVERYTHING YOU WANT FROM A GOOD FF GAME LAID OUT BEFORE YOU ALL IN THE FIRST FEW MINUTES."**

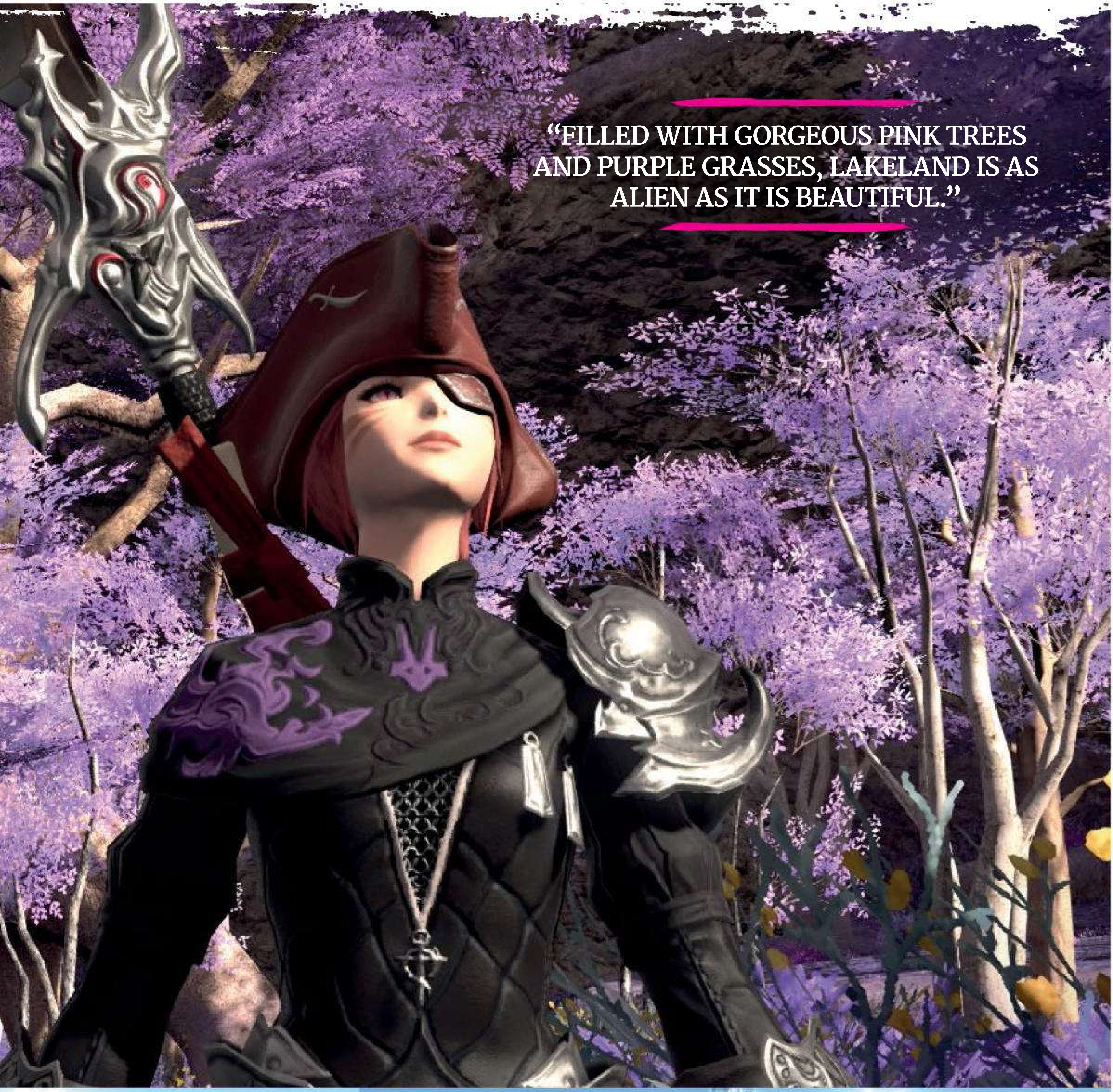
CRYSTAL CLEAR

As you continue on your path, the road opens up and you can see the Crystal Tower piercing the sky in front of you. The camera pans back to show you the full scene and the title appears and it's at this point that it hits you: *this* is what Final Fantasy is all about. A new world full of spectacular scenery to explore, a dark secret waiting to be uncovered, and a grand adventure that's about to begin. It's the essence of the Final Fantasy series at its very best. There's even a nod to the past thrown in there for good measure with the Crystal Tower. It's got everything you want from a good FF game laid out before you all in the first few minutes of arriving.

It's a fantastic way to build up anticipation for everything you're about to do, and the eventual payoff you'll get when you restore the sky and see the stars again for the first time. If we could forget and relive one moment repeatedly in FFXIV, it would be this one. There's just nothing quite like that anticipation of adventure. We're excited for Dawntrail to perform this magic trick all over again. ■







"FILLED WITH GORGEOUS PINK TREES AND PURPLE GRASSES, LAKELAND IS AS ALIEN AS IT IS BEAUTIFUL."

The smallest moments often have the biggest impact.

FINAL FANTASY XIV

THE ULTIMATE COMPANION

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